

HOW TO REPAINT A LIFE



STEVEN HERRICK



Steven Herrick is the author of twenty-six books for children and young adults. His books have twice won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and have been shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards on nine occasions. He is widely recognised as a pioneer of the verse-novel genre for young adults. He is also the author of eight travel books. He spends nine months of the year visiting schools in Australia and three months on his bicycle, travelling around, pedalling slowly and thinking about his next book.

www.stevenherrick.com.au

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Also by Steven Herrick

Young Adult

The bogan Mondrian
Another night in mullet town
Black painted fingernails
By the river
Cold skin
Lonesome howl
Love, ghosts & nose hair
A place like this
The simple gift
Water bombs

Children

Zoe, Max and the Bicycle Bus
Bleakboy and Hunter stand out in the rain
Do-wrong Ron
Love poems and leg-spinners
My life, my love, my lasagne
Naked bunyip dancing
Poetry to the rescue
Pookie Aleera is not my boyfriend
Rhyming boy
The place where the planes take off
Tom Jones saves the world
Untangling spaghetti

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1

HAMMER

Isaac studies the hammer in his hands: the wedge, the claw, the shiny face. A hammer can build stuff: nail fence palings back into a sense of order and homeliness, replace splintered floorboards, hang pictures of dream cars on the wall. It can cover a broken window in the shed with a plywood sheet to keep out the rain.

Or a hammer can destroy: tear down walls, unhinge roofing iron, batter through a timber fence. Or dent a human skull. One strike. One determined blow.

A twinge works its way along Isaac's arm from elbow to wrist.

Too much blood coursing through his veins.

Standing on the faded rug in the lounge room, he whispers to himself, 'I'm ready.' He estimates the distance between where he stands and the bathroom, between there and the front door. He takes a step towards the bathroom and hears his father flush the toilet.

A breath seizes in Isaac's throat. He grips the hammer so tightly the veins along his arm pop.

His father arrived home from the repair shop a few minutes ago, overalls smelling of grease and petrol. He cleans the cars after the mechanics have finished with them. The mechanics use spanners and socket sets. His father uses a dustpan and sponge.

Isaac has been planning this for months. Every afternoon in the shed among the cockroaches and spiders he worked on his biceps and triceps, using the petrol can as a weight. Repeat sets of twenty lifts. He swung the can in a wide arc, focusing on his balance and power. If he could swing a petrol can, the hammer should be easy. After returning the can to the

shelves, Isaac would walk to the centre of the shed, reach up to the crossbeam and pull himself towards the cobwebs. He started with ten chin-ups in June. It's now November and he can do forty. His tall and cumbersome body has shed every ounce of fat.

He digs the fingers of his left hand into his right bicep. He's proud of the bulge. He's worked for this moment.

The bathroom door creaks. The light switch is flicked off.

'Shit,' Isaac whispers, backing away, his hands trembling.

He scans the lounge room, choosing the best place to stand to launch his attack. He moves towards the new television his father bought last week, with a credit card maxed to the limit. It took his father hours on Sunday to attach the antenna to the roof. Isaac sat in the lounge while his father scrambled across the corrugated iron. Isaac hoped for one slip, one misstep.

He remembers Splotch, the rescue dog he'd raised from a pup. Splotch had messy brown fur, a stubby wagging tail, bowlegs and a square head. He looked like a killer but was as gentle as sleep. He followed Isaac around the house, always carrying a stick or a soggy ball. Splotch would play fetch for hours. He survived on leftovers and hugs from Isaac.

One morning his father stumbled out of the bedroom after a drunken night and fell over Splotch in the hallway. Splotch yelped. Isaac's father swung his boot and collected Splotch square in the balls. Isaac had never heard such heart-crushing pain. Splotch half-yelped, half-howled and ran out of the house, across the front yard and onto the street just as a car was passing. Isaac remembers the sound of car tyres skidding.

The yelping stopped.

He found Splotch quivering in the middle of the road. He knelt down and touched his matted fur. The dog stared at Isaac with sad eyes. Isaac thought Splotch looked sorry for leaving him alone with the old man.

His father didn't bother to come outside.

Isaac carried Splotch into the backyard and got a shovel from the shed. He dug a hole near the fence and buried him. He cried all morning even though

part of him thought Splotch was in a better place.

Isaac takes a deep breath and holds it for as long as possible, then exhales.

‘This is for you, Splotch,’ he says.

His hand starts to tremble, his palm sweats, the hammer slips.

His father’s footsteps approach.

Closing his eyes, Isaac swings the hammer at the television. A bullet hole fractures the screen. Shards of glass circle Isaac. Blood oozes from a cut on his thumb and drips onto the rug.

His father stands at the entrance to the lounge room.

Isaac tightens his grip on the weapon.

‘You rotten little shit!’ his father shouts.

Isaac springs towards the front door, evading his father’s lunge as he trips on the rug. The screen door bangs as Isaac jumps from the verandah into the front yard, following Splotch’s retreat through the weeds and over the gravel. He runs across the road, the hammer heavy in his hand.

Isaac’s father charges through the door, grunting like a bull. He lumbers out of the house and onto the driveway, bare feet twisting in the gravel. A car slows between them. The driver glances from Isaac to his father. It’s enough to convince her to keep going.

A hot westerly wind blows through town, creaking gates, loosening the corrugated-iron roofs, coating everything in a suffocating dust. Dry lightning flashes in the distance.

Isaac’s chest heaves. He stares at the hammer. Blood runs down the wooden handle. Isaac skips forward and tosses the hammer. It cartwheels through the sky and pitches on the roof, banging and clattering all the way down to wedge in the gutter. Isaac and his father stare at it for a few seconds.

Isaac wipes the bloodied thumb on his trousers. The hammer’s gone, the television’s in pieces, his father’s furious. If only his hands would stop trembling.

His father raises his fist. ‘You’ve gotta come home sometime,’ he shouts,

before turning and stomping inside.

Isaac wants to yell that he's never coming back. Not this time. Not ever. The words catch in his throat. A crow lands on the edge of the gutter, not far from the hammer, pecking at an insect. Isaac hunches down on his knees, listening to his stomach churn. A whirly wind dances through the bush and skitters across the road, sucking cigarette butts and potato crisp wrappers into a dusty column.

A recycling truck rumbles down the street, emptying bins. It skips his father's house. Isaac forgot to put out the bin. On the side of the truck is a picture of a family with perfect teeth, clear skin and smiling children gathered on a soft lawn.

Isaac takes one last look at the house. A fibro panel at the front is split; another has mould rising to the window ledge. The gutters are torn and rusting. The gate hangs crooked on its hinges and the fence is missing more palings than what remains. His father's antenna already looks wonky, as if the gathering wind will blow it away, but it's in better shape than the television.

The day closes in as Isaac wanders into the paddock where his bag is hidden. He knows his father will be in the lounge, drinking beer after beer, staring at the wall, not watching television. Waiting.

Isaac has seventy-five dollars and a backpack full of clothes. He walks past houses of timber and wire fences, with tilted letterboxes, chook sheds and mulberry bushes; past the corner store on Jackson and Main that closed when he was five years old, the sign advertising Tetley Tea faded in the window; past the showground of long grass and abandoned stables, a rusted windmill at the entrance clanking in the breeze.

A posse of utes rumbles past, their tyres humming on the bitumen. A woman waters her garden, taking an unnecessary interest in the hydrangea bush as Isaac passes. A man in grimy jeans and an orange work shirt pushes a shopping trolley full of plastic bottles and empty soft drink cans down the footpath, its wheels juddering in the weeds and potholes. He kicks the

trolley as Isaac steps aside.

At the bus station, Isaac walks to the ticket machine and buys a ticket for the next bus departing the station. The ticket costs twenty-three dollars, and Isaac buys a spinach pie to celebrate leaving town. The bus pulls up and he's first on board.

He walks to the rear. It smells of stale vomit and cigarettes, even though smoking isn't allowed. Isaac returns to the front and tosses his bag on the rack before slouching into the seat near the door. He keeps his head down but watches every person who passes. He knows his father is at home drinking beer, but it doesn't make the waiting any easier.

After a few minutes, the driver turns the ignition, music pipes from the speakers and the bus shudders away. Isaac closes his eyes. He's seen enough of this town for a lifetime.

Once they're on the highway, Isaac looks out over the plains of scrubland and gum trees. Farmhouses bake on dry hills above dams that are cracked and empty, sheep cluster in patches of shade and a lone tractor plows a paddock. Advertisements alongside the road offer the latest in cattle-dipping and headache relief. On one billboard, a woman in denim shorts pats a dog while talking to a farmer on a quad bike. It takes Isaac a while to realise it's a tourist advertisement for the region.

Isaac notices the driver is singing each song on the radio. Another tune, another few kilometres further away from his father.

2

BLADE

Sophie tucks her legs under her body and stares at the blade in her hands: the shiny curved steel edge, the mushroom-shaped handle with the words *Swiss Made* inked on the side. She sits on her bedroom floor, surrounded by framed linocuts of wheelbarrows and windows, pot plants and park benches, bicycles and bathtubs.

Her long hair falls across her face. She reaches to her desk, opens the top drawer and takes out a rubber band before tying a tight ponytail. This week for sure she is going to the hairdressers and getting it cut off.

‘Pfeil,’ she whispers. What a strange name for a tool that can slice your finger, that can draw blood in an instant. One slip and the linoleum will be covered in dripping blood not vibrant black ink. Sophie’s eyes wander to the packet of bandaids on her desk. Better to be prepared. But would a bandaid bind the sinews, muscles, bones of a hand?

Sophie lifts the pfeil close to her nostrils. The smell of the pear handle relaxes her, makes her ready to carve. She places the grey lino on the non-slip matting. Earlier she’d drawn the outline of a cubbyhouse and an owl. The owl sits on the A-frame, its eyes round, searching for a field mouse. Should she draw the mouse on the lino? Did she have the skill to carve something so small? The cubby has horizontal and vertical lines of timber beams, an arched doorway at the front and a window at the side, just like the one in the garden she built with her dad years ago.

She grips the handle of the blade and leans forward, pressing it into the lino, the smell overpowering.

A knock at the door. Sophie drops the pfeil.

Her mum, Dana, enters the room, wearing black jeans and a *Free Nelson*

Mandela t-shirt that's older than Sophie. Her hair is short and trim. She sits at the chair near Sophie's desk.

'Don't let me interrupt,' Dana says.

'I'm busy,' Sophie answers. As if that'll deter her mum.

'I'll just sit here. Not saying a word,' Dana says.

Her voice sounds sincere, but if Sophie had a texta she'd draw a line through every word. That's what her dad does when he finds words he doesn't agree with. Whatever isn't true, isn't believable, earns a black line. Like the Farmhouse Gold milk carton with the word *Farmhouse* inked out. The muesli packet with a black slash through the *Morning Sun* label.

He'd even recently admitted to her that he was responsible for crossing out words on advertising signs in bus shelters all over town. He called it 'editing the world'.

'I like to watch you work,' Dana says.

Sophie picks up the blade and slowly carves the grey lino, beginning with the straight lines of the cubbyhouse. Despite her mum's presence, every fibre of Sophie's being is focused on each carve into the pliable material. Without realising, she folds her bottom lip in on itself, an exaggerated mark of concentration. Sophie sits back and looks at her handiwork. Is it too neat? Should her old cubby have a little wonkiness, a sense of the ramshackle? Sophie does one more cut – slightly longer, more jagged.

Her mother breaks the spell. 'How's your English essay going?'

'I'm doing Art homework first,' Sophie says. 'It's more important.'

'I had visions of being an artist,' Dana replies, 'until the reality of rent and food hit.'

Sophie knows the story. Her parents living in the city, in love with each other and writing. Both destined to pen the next great Australian novel. Now her dad works at the shire council and her mum part-time at a giftware shop in town.

'How is writing an English essay going to get me a job?' Sophie says, the linocut forgotten.

‘Good marks mean university. Law? Medicine?’

‘A doctor needs a steady hand,’ Sophie says, picking up the blade. ‘This linocut could be a patient’s abdomen.’

‘You’re going to cut an owl into their stomach?’

‘Picasso did linocuts,’ Sophie says.

‘And married more than once. Had children with a few women and—’

‘Sounds like fun.’

‘For the man,’ Sophie’s mum says. ‘Who’s going to feed the baby while you’re cutting pieces of lino?’

‘Maybe I don’t want to have babies or get married,’ Sophie says. ‘Maybe I’ll have multiple partners and a drinking habit, just like Pablo.’

Suddenly, loud music blasts from the lounge room. Driving guitars, urgent vocals. The wall beside Sophie shakes.

‘Your dad’s home early,’ Dana says.

They both stand and walk into the lounge room. Sophie’s dad, Gerry, is lying on the sofa, dressed in a lycra cycling outfit, his shoes kicked on the floor. Music jangles in the space between Sophie and her dad. The singer’s voice is young, nasal and strident, singing about failed love.

Sophie’s mum reaches for the remote control and presses pause. Gerry opens his eyes.

‘He’s dead,’ he says, sitting up.

Dana puts her hand to her mouth.

‘Who?’ asks Sophie.

‘Pete Shelley,’ her dad says.

‘Oh no,’ says her mum. She sits beside her husband.

‘Is he a friend from work?’ Sophie asks.

‘Pete Shelley,’ her dad repeats, as if the name is enough.

‘Lead singer of the Buzzcocks,’ her mum explains.

Sophie suppresses a giggle. Not because Pete’s dead – she’s never heard of him. It’s just that her parents’ favourite bands all have rude names. The Sex Pistols. The Buzzcocks. Stiff Little Fingers.

Sophie sits on the other side of her dad and puts an arm around his shoulder. 'Was it drugs?'

'Heart attack.'

'How old was he?'

'Sixty-three.'

Sophie tries to picture the man behind the youthful voice she heard a minute ago as an old guy. Did he have grey hair and a beer gut? Did he wander to the shop every morning for milk and bread, the sound of his youth rattling around in his head?

'Was he unhappy in love?' Sophie asks, thinking of the lyrics she'd just heard.

Gerry shakes his head. 'His wife's name is Greta. They lived in Estonia.'

'Is that a tax haven?' Sophie had read about rock stars avoiding tax by moving to exotic destinations.

'Greta was Estonian. Pete said he liked the tranquillity.'

'He was a punk, right?' Sophie asks.

Her dad nods.

'A punk moving to Eastern Europe for the peace and quiet,' Sophie says.

Her dad ignores the irony. 'First it was Bowie, then Prince, now Pete.'

Sophie doesn't know what to say. Sixty-three sounds pretty old, but her parents are both in their fifties. She looks at them beside her on the sofa, suddenly worried. Her dad is tall and lean, not an ounce of fat on his body. All that cycling to and from work, and on the weekend with his bicycle club. And her mum in her tight jeans and t-shirt. No heart attacks on this sofa.

Sophie reaches across and pushes play on the remote, then stretches out on the sofa, looking around the room. Books and CDs line every wall, are scattered on the coffee table, piled on her dad's desk in the common area. The house was designed by her dad before she was born. Her parents' bedroom is at one end, hers at the other with this massive common space in between. The kitchen is divided by a large wooden bench, the sink

overlooking a front garden of fruit trees and succulents.

The three of them sit on the sofa, listening to Pete fall in love all over again. Despite himself.

Later, Sophie finds her dad in the kitchen cooking chicken and mushroom risotto. He did the same after Bowie and Prince died. It's become a sombre ritual. Sophie's mum is in the back garden trying to get the herbs to survive in the oncoming summer heat. Sophie is listening to her dad's top ten Pete Shelley songs. Her favourite is still the one about falling in love. She wondered how that felt? To fall in love. Either with someone you should, or shouldn't. She pictured the boys at school.

Jay Beecher.

Tori Sneldon.

Aubrey Holmes.

She couldn't imagine cuddling up to Aubrey with his gangly limbs and bony elbows, his size fourteen shoes poking into the space between them. Or kissing Tori's acne, all the while breathing in that weird boy smell – unwashed socks and bad BO. Jay had a lazy eye. Every time they spoke she thought he was looking over her shoulder about to greet someone else.

And then there was Butler, the mayor's son.

She shivers, remembering the time Butler asked her to go swimming at the river, a few weeks after her seventeenth birthday.

She didn't mean to laugh in response. It just seemed odd that he'd ask her out after ignoring her for most of high school. Had he exhausted all the other candidates? Butler was tall, had weightlifter arms, a floppy haircut and teeth that were unnaturally even and white. Sophie also thought he had cold eyes.

They became even colder when she had the temerity to laugh at his invitation. He turned and walked off without another word. By the end of the day, Sophie was ostracised. Butler's gang sneered and pointed and whispered when she walked past at lunchtime, as if she'd grown horns and a tail.

It was the worst timing. A week earlier, Sophie's best friend, Rebecca Close, had left town for good. Almost a year later, Sophie still ached for her friend.

Rebecca and Sophie used to spend hours after school at Joan's Cafe in Main Street, comparing notes on what they planned to do the moment they left school. Rebecca wanted to be a journalist and Sophie wanted to be an artist. They giggled over their milkshakes at the possibilities of dreaming big in a town so small.

'My mum has perfume from Paris, Rome and New York,' Rebecca once said. 'I'm taking the perfume tour before I turn twenty.'

Rebecca had bright brown eyes and a wide mouth, long fingers and painted nails. She wore rings on most fingers and a nose-ring on the weekend. She talked of tattoos, hair dye and the secrets of wearing clothes just the right way. The boys at school tried to impress her but Rebecca ignored them all, preferring Sophie's company. Even the popular girls like Sienna Baxter and Isabella Peruzzi knew better than to get on the wrong side of Rebecca.

'A life without men is a life well lived,' Rebecca said, as they slurped on their milkshakes in a dark corner of Joan's Cafe.

'Who wrote that?' Sophie asked.

'I did,' Rebecca replied, and they both laughed.

Joan's Cafe was the dowdiest place on Main Street, frequented by old ladies and farmers, but Joan added extra malt to their milkshakes, or a second scoop of ice cream, and never raised her prices. In the afternoon, they had the place to themselves. All their classmates hung out at Grind Cafe across the road.

Then the abattoir closed. In a week, the school lost thirty-four students, including Rebecca. Families scattered like confetti, loading their four-wheel drives, pulling trailers, heading south to the city in search of employment, not looking back.

Rebecca's family outdid everyone and moved to Perth, where her parents

both found work in the mines. Sophie wondered if her mum wore fancy perfume underground, or did she work in an office?

For the next few months, Rebecca and Sophie texted at least once a day. Rebecca sent photos of the wide streets of her new city, the long white-sand beaches, the glistening skyscrapers. Sophie retreated to the library and read books on women who travelled the world, texting photos of book covers in reply. She visited Joan's in the afternoon but somehow the milkshakes didn't taste as malted, nor as thick and creamy. She left the cafe to the old ladies in cardigans and the farmers in Akubras and moleskins.

After a few months, the texts dwindled. Sophie imagined Rebecca surrounded by new friends. Soon enough, the texts were replaced with an occasional emoji. A love heart, a popping champagne bottle, a surfboard. And then they stopped altogether.

Rebecca Close was no longer close.

Sophie became a gang of one at school. Butler ruled the seniors' common room, surrounded by Sienna, Isabella and the boys who majored in hacky sack and rude comments.

Pete Shelley howls his lost love into the kitchen once more, returning Sophie to the present.

Sophie is not falling in love with anyone in her school. Anyone in town. She has considered each and every possibility and they all fall short. It's not that she has high standards. Rebecca was right. The teenage male citizens of her town have all the appeal of a milkshake without malt, a song without lyrics and a life without art.

3

BOTTLES

After her dad's commemorative risotto, Sophie returns to her linocut. She spends longer than necessary carving the walls and beams of the cubby so they're even more brittle looking, as if they'd collapse under a strong wind. She wants the cubby to symbolise being a kid again, a time when she didn't miss her best friend, or feel the chill of loneliness at lunchtime. There's other homework that needs doing, but her linocuts always win.

One more year of school and then Sophie has to make a decision. Art college in Melbourne? Linocuts every day. Maybe being part of an exhibition, with people looking at her cubby and seeing ... What? Decay? Abandon? Despair? Or just ink on white paper?

That's the secret Sophie wants to master. How to make ink expressive. Can the black-and-white texture of a linocut hint at missing friends, the secret of boys, the joy of milkshakes and laughter, the comfort of her bed and a good book?

Would there be girls like Rebecca at art college? Confident and stylish. Girls she could confide in when she was a long way from her parents? Girls who understood that hours carving lino wasn't a waste of time, but was the best way to speak to the world? Or understand yourself?

Sophie studies her linocut again. It needs to be more jagged, more ... blotchy, messy, like life. She wraps masking tape around the pfeil where her fingers rest, to prevent blisters.

As she focuses on the linocut, Sophie can hear her parents talking through the open window.

Sophie watched them drink too much at dinner. Three bottles of beer for her dad and a half-bottle of riesling for her mum. She stacked the

dishwasher while they retreated to the two chairs in the garden under the blackwood tree not far from her window.

‘He’ll always be twenty-four to me,’ her dad says, his voice amplified by alcohol.

Sophie stretches up from the floor to peer outside. Her dad is picking up a half-empty beer bottle from the paving stones.

‘Bugger,’ he says.

A kookaburra starts up above their heads and Sophie watches her parents jump in fright.

‘It’s no laughing matter,’ Gerry says to the bird. Then he rubs his bald head and stands. ‘My bladder’s not what it was,’ he says, before walking to the lemon tree near the cubbyhouse in the garden.

‘You know I can hear every word,’ Sophie calls to her parents.

‘Sorry, Sophie,’ Dana answers. ‘Your dad’s had too much to drink.’

‘Only Dad?’ Sophie says.

‘We’ll keep it down,’ Gerry says. ‘How’s the linocut?’

‘Half-finished. Maybe.’

Sophie looks at the linocuts on her walls. She learnt how to draw and paint before she entered high school – water-based, oils, crayons and charcoal – but nothing gave her any satisfaction until she discovered linoleum and a sharp blade. Sophie thought it was ironic she was wedded to a sharp cutting instrument as the workers in the abattoir were downing tools.

Sophie also enjoyed the black and white of linocuts, knowing it was the opposite of how people felt, always smudged in the grey. Here on the bedroom floor she could indulge; she could lose herself in the texture. She loved how the white space was the discarded pieces, how a simple cut could convey emptiness. Or loss. It wasn’t the owl or the cubby that were important, but the space around them.

After Rebecca left, Sophie retreated to her bedroom and folded herself into the empty spaces and the silence. At school, she was left alone.

Students who'd tried to be friends when Rebecca was around ignored her. She enjoyed being invisible, imagining herself as a three-dimensional linocut – the empty space, the bit that's cut out.

When her dad saw her first linocut of a wheelbarrow full of flowers, he hugged her and the next day came home with a frame. After cutting and fitting, they hung the linocut on the lounge-room wall. Whenever anyone came to visit he made them pay homage to his daughter's handiwork. Sophie went from being embarrassed by her dad to proud of herself. The linocuts might not win any prizes, but she lost herself in their creation and liked looking at them when they were finished and framed. She focused on Melbourne and the possibility of art college.

'Do you remember Jonah Negroni from the old days?' Her mother's voice draws Sophie's attention back to the garden. Her dad sits down in his chair and opens another beer.

'I was always jealous of that big-boned creep,' he says.

'Jonah was a rock god,' Dana says.

'He sang Clash covers in a pub band,' Gerry says.

'They had original songs too,' Dana responds.

'Yeah. But no-one gave a shit until they played "London's Burning". In Fitzroy.'

'Jonah was the only man I knew who could wear leather pants,' Dana says, her voice thirty years away. Both parents take a sip of their respective drinks. 'Anyway, I looked him up on Facebook.'

'And?'

'He offers guitar lessons in Bendigo,' she says. 'And works as a janitor at a primary school.'

Her dad takes another swig.

'Not much call for leather pants while emptying rubbish bins and picking up scraps from the playground,' Dana adds.

'It's a living,' Gerry replies. 'No different from the rest of us.'

'I thought you'd be pleased,' Dana says. 'Rock god to janitor.'

‘None of us are doing what we did thirty years ago,’ Gerry says. ‘Everyone who picked up a pen or a guitar or a paintbrush is ...’

Sophie moves closer to the window.

‘You have a book.’ Dana reaches across and touches her husband on the shoulder.

‘Six hundred and twenty-two copies sold,’ Gerry says.

‘So? At least it was published,’ Dana says.

‘I changed the world with a stanza.’

‘Who changes the world except politicians and assassins?’ Dana’s voice is loud.

A cicada starts outside and Sophie is reminded of the chainsaw guitars of the Buzzcocks.

‘Pete changed my world,’ her dad says, his voice low and flat. ‘If only for three minutes.’

Sophie sees her parents stand and hug one another under the blackwood tree. A dog barks from somewhere over the back fence. The kookaburra starts up again and cicadas thrum the rhythm section late into the night.

After her parents are asleep, Sophie creeps into the common area and runs her hand along the bookshelves. Her dad’s volume of poetry is squeezed between *Of Mice and Men* and *Blue Highways*. His favourite books. On the cover of her dad’s book is a guitar smashing against an amplifier, but instead of shards of wood or plastic spraying everywhere, there are treble clefs, love hearts and question marks. The book is called *of fury and hope*. Sophie wonders why there are no capital letters in the title. She carries his ninety-six pages back to her bedroom, climbs under the covers and opens at a random page.

She last read the book in her first year of high school. Ms Sims, her English teacher, had requested each student find a poem they liked. She couldn’t wait to get home and choose one of her dad’s. She hated the jigsaw puzzle of most poetry they’d studied in Year Seven but her dad’s poems seemed real, as if written by an ordinary person, not someone who’d spent

their life at university.

She'd liked all of his poems, even those she didn't fully understand. There were poems about sex and music. She was too scared to choose those ones in case Ms Sims disapproved. In the end, she chose this poem:

Talking one night

*Talking one night
together in the crowded corner,
both happy until
you said
something about my nose, love hurts.*

*On the way home
we laughed about it.
You added that my nose
wasn't as bad as my hair, love hurts.*

*Realising you'd gone too far
you apologised,
while reminding me that
beauty isn't everything, love hurts.*

*During the best times, love hurts.
Love hurts, at the best of times.*

Sophie suppresses a smile. Her dad was a born romantic. She wonders if her mum is the other person in the poem.

She pictures them walking home after a party, hand in hand. Her mum speaking plainly, her dad lost in dreams. And now he wears lycra, defaces advertisements once a week and frames every linocut she creates, while her mum has channelled her creativity into the garden, but is still as beautiful as she was in the photos from art college, hands on her hips as if ready to take on the world.

Sophie likes her parents. She'll be sad to leave them when she moves to Melbourne. *If* she moves to Melbourne.

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4

TOAST

Isaac feels a hand on his shoulder and wakes with a start. A security guard in a dark-grey uniform and a peaked cap stands over him. Isaac reaches for his backpack. He blinks, his eyes adjusting to the early morning light streaming across the bus terminal.

‘You can’t sleep here, mate,’ the security guard says.

‘What ... what time is it?’ Isaac asks.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ the guard says. ‘No sleeping here, day or night.’

Isaac remembers the bus pulling in last night, and wandering around the terminal, looking for a place to sleep. The waiting room doors were locked, so he carried his backpack to the quietest corner of the terminal and lay down on a bench seat, facing away from the kiosk and the streetlights. He slept fitfully, the slats of the seat digging into his ribs and a catfight waking him in the middle of the night.

‘Are you waiting for a bus?’ the security guard asks.

Isaac shakes his head, stifles a yawn and stands, lifting his backpack from the seat.

‘Sorry, sir,’ he says, before shuffling across the bus lanes. Better to leave before the guard asks any more questions.

He shields his eyes from the sun’s glare and glances back to the terminal. The guard is still watching him.

Isaac turns and walks away, the backpack slung over his shoulder. His phone dings with a text. He takes it out of his pocket, swipes the screen and sees it’s from his father. He removes the sim card from the phone and tosses it into a rubbish bin. He’ll buy a five-dollar replacement soon. A new phone number. One his father doesn’t know.

He needs a coffee.

Near a roundabout, he locates the town's noticeboard, plotting his chances with the map on display.

Library.

River.

Football field.

Places to rest, wash and sleep? Somewhere without security guards?

A young boy with ginger hair and big ears, dressed in a school uniform, stands beside Isaac waiting for the traffic lights to change. Every time a truck goes past the kid waves and pulls an imaginary horn.

'Do they ever let rip?' Isaac asks.

The kid looks at him, surprised by the question. 'Sometimes,' he answers.

The lights change and they start crossing. The kid says, 'One thing I've noticed, only truckies with beards blow their horns.' The kid hitches his schoolbag over a shoulder and looks back at the trucks moving off. 'Why do ya think that is?' he adds.

Isaac shrugs. A big rig slows for the bend. They both look. The driver has a beard that would make a bushranger proud. The kid jumps up and down on the spot, pulling his imaginary horn for all it's worth. The driver doesn't even look their way.

The kid glances at Isaac. 'It doesn't always work.'

'Maybe next time, hey?'

The boy waves and turns back, just in case another truck is passing.

Isaac walks through the entrance to McDonald's and looks for the table as far away from the counter as possible. It's occupied by a family. The dad has finished eating and is looking at his watch and tapping his fingers on the table. The mum wipes the mouth of the youngest child who's put too much maple syrup on her pancakes and got most of it on her face. The other kid pushes away his muffin and shakes the last few drops out of his soft drink, the ice clinking. The dad says something to the mum and they get up to leave. Both children ask for an ice cream. The dad ignores their question

and walks to the door. The mum does her best to hold each of her kids' hands and shepherds them out of the restaurant. The dad is already halfway to the car.

Isaac strides across to the table and sits down before anyone has a chance to clear away the mess. He hopes they'll think it's his leftovers and leave him be, let him sit here with a comfortable seat and air conditioning for as long as daylight. The half-eaten muffin sits in front of him. He closes his eyes, slips his hand into his pocket to feel the cash loitering there. He could eat what's in front of him and no-one would be the wiser. A free meal?

Isaac senses a presence and opens his eyes. A young girl in a McDonald's uniform stands over the table, her brown hair tied high, held in place by a cap.

'You can clear this away,' Isaac says. 'I'm full.'

She looks at the array of cardboard packaging, paper bags and muffin wrappers.

'It's a medical issue,' Isaac jokes. 'I need lots of food.'

She attempts a smile, then raises her hand to her mouth to hide her braces, before stacking the trays and rubbish together and walking away, without offering to wipe the table.

A few minutes later the store manager approaches. Her hair is short and has flecks of grey in the fringe. She doesn't wear make-up. She wipes Isaac's table and says, 'Can we help you with something else, sir?'

Isaac pats his stomach. 'I've eaten so much, but maybe I'll have a coffee. Soon. Not now.'

The manager looks at Isaac's clothes and old backpack. Her lips are set in a frown as she wipes the table once again. 'When you're ready for a coffee, come to the counter,' she says. 'Any time you're ready.'

Which means soon. Don't hang around, buster.

When the manager retreats to the fryers, Isaac stands and leaves through the back entrance near a children's playground of coloured plastic slides and towers. Children are welcome, as long as they bring their parents.

On Main Street, Isaac looks for a friendly cafe. The street is lined with two-storey buildings – a shop on the ground level and curtainless windows above. Belle Rose Emporium sells candles and women's clothes; a real estate office has a yellow bicycle in the window; the Valley Butchers display rosettes for award-winning sausages; and the Blue Fox Restaurant has a thick chain secured around the double doors, its windows shuttered.

Isaac walks past a hole-in-the-wall cafe. The guy behind the machine has a beard and shaggy hair. The girl wiping a table on the footpath wears a tight black t-shirt, jeans and has a tattoo of a butterfly on her forearm. The cafe is crowded and the music is too loud.

Across the road is a dark place with an arched sign on the window announcing *Joan's Cafe*. Isaac pushes open the door and a bell rings from above. He sits near the window, taking all the loose coins out of his pocket and scattering them on the table. A middle-aged lady behind the counter wears a floral dress covered by a blue apron with the Sydney Opera House emblazoned on it in white stitching. She's serving a man wearing jeans and a chequered shirt, chatting about repairs to the highway and whether the council can afford to fix the cracks caused by the sustained heatwave. Isaac slowly counts his silver coins, mostly ten-cent pieces. Three dollars.

When the customer leaves, the lady walks over to Isaac and offers him a menu.

Isaac smiles. 'Sorry. I'll just have a coffee, please.' He slides the money off the table into his hand and adds, 'Is three dollars enough?' He ignores the menu in her hand. He tries to look worried, concerned, thirsty.

The woman hesitates for a few seconds before answering, 'Sure. A flat white?'

'That'd be great. Thanks.'

As the woman walks away, Isaac reaches across to the next table for the menu.

Flat White: \$4.00

The woman fusses behind the espresso machine, alternating between

checking the dials and watching her new customer. Isaac expects she offered him a cheap coffee because she has no other customers now. She carries the cup to the table and slides it in front of him. He thanks her again, then points at the window sign. 'Are you Joan?' he asks.

'One and the same,' the woman says. 'Owner, cook, coffee-maker, cleaner.'

Isaac looks around at the black-and-white linoleum on the floor, the faded paint on the walls and the shiny stainless-steel counter framed with pressed-metal inlays of Greek gods. 'How old is this place?' he asks.

'I bought it off a Greek couple in 2002. They'd been here for thirty years before that. It was called Plaka Cafe,' Joan says. 'I've often thought about renovating, but I used to come here as a child and Mrs Stavros made the best caramel malted milks. I couldn't do it to her. Or to Zeus, Hermes and Aphrodite.'

She looks around her cafe once more and sighs. 'What's your name, son?' she asks.

No-one had ever called him son before. His stomach rumbles and he shifts in his chair, thinking of the crowd in the cafe opposite and the manager at McDonald's. Places where no-one wants to know your name.

'Isaac,' he answers.

'I used to get a few schoolgirls in here, but most young people head to Grind across the road,' Joan says.

'It looks too expensive and unfriendly,' Isaac says.

Joan laughs, walks back to the counter and holds up a half-empty plastic bag of bread. 'Listen, I've got some out-of-date raisin bread. Do you want two slices toasted? No charge.'

Isaac flashes her a smile that shows every one of his crooked teeth. His mum once said he had an infectious grin. His father said, 'Infected, you mean.'

'Wow, sure thing. Thanks a lot.' Isaac stands and walks to the counter, figuring she shouldn't have to carry the food to his table, not if it's free.

Joan pops the slices into the toaster and wipes the bench even though it's spotlessly clean. Then she leans down to the fridge under the counter and removes a tub of butter. She looks up at Isaac.

'My grandson Brodie loves it spread thick,' she says.

'How old is he?'

'Six,' she replies. 'My son Mike's marriage didn't work out, so Brodie lives in two houses, with two sets of toys, a dog in one and cat in the other.' She inhales a slow breath.

'It sounds like he's ... lucky,' Isaac answers.

Joan looks up. 'They're doing their best.' She slices the toast into quarters and hands the plate to Isaac.

'Does Brodie like them cut like that as well?' Isaac says.

'Once a mother, always ...' Joan says.

Isaac stares at the toast, not wanting to think of his own mother.

'The secret is butter, not margarine,' Joan continues. She looks out to the street. Isaac follows her gaze. The cafe opposite has tables on the footpath, crowded with customers.

Joan reads his mind. 'I couldn't afford the council fee to put tables outside,' she says.

'Maybe if you switch to margarine.' Isaac smiles, so she knows he's joking.

'I'll stick with butter,' Joan says. She takes a cloth from the sink, wrings it out and wipes the counter again.

'What did you do before opening the cafe?' Isaac asks, to fill the silence.

'I was a housewife,' she says. 'Then over scrambled eggs one morning my husband said he didn't want to be married anymore.'

'Oh.'

'He was having an affair with the woman from the shoe shop in Harold Lane,' Joan scoffs. 'They moved north and when our divorce came through, they got engaged.' Joan rinses the cloth and hangs it over the tap. 'It turns out he just didn't want to be married to me.'

‘Shit.’ Isaac doesn’t know what else to say.

Joan laughs. ‘His leaving was the best thing that ever happened to me,’ she says. ‘We sold the house, split the money and I bought something smaller.’ She nods at the window sign. ‘I needed a job so I put a deposit on this place. Mike was still in school when I opened.’

‘You’d have lots of regulars, I imagine,’ Isaac says, finishing his toast.

She reaches across the counter for his empty plate. ‘A few,’ she says. ‘But since Grind opened, business has slowed.’ She looks back at Isaac. ‘So what about you? I’ve told you my life story.’

Isaac shuffles from one foot to the other. ‘I’m ... new in town,’ he says, and immediately regrets it. He should have said, ‘We’re new in town.’ He can tell Joan wants to ask another question, but she busies herself washing the plate and returning the milk to the fridge.

‘Anyway, I better get home.’ Isaac holds out his hand, full of coins. ‘Sorry,’ he repeats.

‘It’s all cash, son,’ she says. ‘You come again soon.’

Isaac walks to the door, turns and nods goodbye.

Joan’s still at the counter. Isaac’s not sure if she’s looking at him or at the bustling cafe opposite.

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5

SOCKS

The next morning at school, Sophie goes to the library and scans the shelves for her dad's book. To her surprise, there's a copy in the poetry section. She removes it from the shelf and holds it close to her nose. It smells of paper and dust. The spine is still firm and the pages clean but yellowing. On the back page are two date stamps from the past ten years.

'Do you read poetry?' a voice behind her asks.

Sophie abruptly closes the book. Standing at the end of the aisle is Trudie Goddard. Trudie is tall and awkward, rarely speaks in class, has a habit of biting her fingernails, wears clunky glasses and lives outside of town.

Sophie looks around to check no-one can hear. 'It's my dad's.'

Trudie looks confused.

'My dad wrote it,' Sophie repeats.

'Really?' Trudie reaches for the book.

Sophie hesitates before handing it to her. Trudie strokes the cover and holds it to her nose, just like Sophie did.

'My dad drives a truck,' Trudie says.

'He makes more money for that than my dad did from poetry,' Sophie answers, before biting her lip. It's not only about money.

'Can I borrow it?' Trudie asks.

Sophie shrugs.

'Aren't you proud?' Trudie looks confused again.

Sophie nods, but doesn't understand why she's reluctant for another student to read it. Maybe the poem she read last night is too personal.

'My dad wants me to learn how to drive a truck.' Trudie blushes. 'To keep the business in the family.'

‘What do you want to do?’ Sophie asks.

Trudie looks down at the book in her hands. ‘I’d rather live the life of a character in a book than be a truck driver.’

Sophie thinks of the poem she read last night.

‘I’m ... I’m planning on going to art college,’ Trudie adds. She stands a little straighter. ‘No matter what my dad says.’

‘Can I join you?’

‘Sure. We can share books and food, and ...’

‘Art?’ Sophie suggests. She wonders why she hasn’t tried to be friends with Trudie before now.

Trudie blushes again. ‘I dream and draw too much.’

‘Sounds like a good combination to me.’ Sophie remembers seeing Trudie’s line drawing of a dog in class. It was perfectly proportioned, shaded in all the right angles and had a jaunty character.

Trudie holds up the book, before turning and walking to the front desk.

Sophie notices Trudie has one sock pulled up to her knee, the other around her ankle. Poetry and awkward clothing.

Sophie chooses an anthology on the lives of female artists and decides to read it under the melaleuca tree behind the library, where she used to sit every lunchtime with Rebecca.

Outside the library, Butler and his mates are playing hacky sack on the concrete path. Sophie steps aside to dodge their game, but Butler stops playing and watches her. Their eyes meet. Sophie holds his gaze for a few seconds before looking down at the book in her hands.

Butler breaks away from his mates and walks towards her.

Sophie’s stomach churns.

‘There’s a party at my place on Saturday night.’ Butler flicks his hair away from his forehead with an exaggerated toss of his head.

Sophie looks around the schoolyard – some students play basketball on the court, others sit in circles chatting animatedly – and she wishes for invisibility.

‘It’s been a while since we talked,’ Butler adds.

‘We’ve never talked,’ Sophie corrects him, wondering why she doesn’t just walk away. Was Butler thinking he was doing her a favour by inviting her to hang out with his gang?

‘My parents are going away for the weekend,’ Butler says. ‘Dad said a party is okay as long as I clean before they get home and no-one drowns in the pool.’

Sophie wonders if she should laugh, like when he invited her to the river, so even Arctic-eyed Butler would get the message.

‘I have a date with a linocut blade,’ she answers.

‘A what?’ Butler flicks his hair again.

‘It’s my new best friend,’ Sophie replies, not caring what Butler thinks. He looks around as if Sophie’s pfeil will walk up and shake his hand. Or cut that annoying flop of hair. Now there’s a thought!

‘Everyone’s coming.’ Butler’s voice doesn’t sound so confident. ‘Well, everyone important.’

‘Must be a very small party,’ Sophie says, under her breath.

‘What?’

Sophie doesn’t answer.

‘Wear your bikini.’ Butler says before turning and walking back to his mates.

Sophie watches him go, determined to forget his invitation.

But if she did go, there’s no way she’d wear a bikini. She’d wear jeans and boots. For kicking, if necessary. Or pack a pfeil.

Later in Science, Sophie imagines who’ll be invited to Butler’s party and who won’t. All the girls from English, except Trudie. The hacky-sack gang and none of the boys from Art. Sorry, Aubrey. The only thing she has in common with the likely partygoers is the school uniform.

Sophie thinks of the school motto: *Endeavour is our future*. When she first read that line, she longed for her dad’s black texta. But after five years at school, it made sense. Most of the boys would end up working on their

parents' farms, or driving trucks filled with sheep or grain. The girls would work in shops, or get a hairdressing apprenticeship. Only the brightest among them would leave town. Of that she was sure.

Sophie's thoughts returned to art college and the possibilities of getting lost in the alleys of Melbourne. To be a small fish in a big pond. To go and see pub bands and eat at student cafes like her parents had. Maybe she and Trudie could share a flat, talk about the mysteries of art, get drunk on cheap wine and forget the boredom of high school forever?

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6

CANS

Isaac wanders the paved footpaths of Main Street. The Courthouse Hotel has blue tiles on its walls interspersed with framed prints of the town's history: a parade of tractors at harvest time, the abattoir opening in 1924, the Holden dealership with bunting and flags, the first locomotive pulling into the railway station. A chalk sign announces *Lunch Specials: \$15 Schnitzels on Monday, \$18 Calamari on Wednesday, Children Eat for \$5 Every Day!*

Next door is the town courthouse, double-brick and austere, a flag flying from the pole, windows with metal awnings and a sign announcing the next session. On the corner is the police station. Isaac crosses the road and wanders past the library, painted vibrant yellow, its windows crowded with announcements: *Storytime for Pre-schoolers, Computer Skills for Beginners, Craft Group, Community Chess*, and Isaac's favourite, *Ukulele Lessons*.

Isaac figures this town is worth staying in for a day or two before heading further north. Maybe he'll cross the country by hitchhiking or look for work picking beans to save enough for the next bus trip, one dusty town at a time.

He walks through the Plains Shopping Centre and watches how much food people stack into bags and load in shopping trolleys. Tins and packets and jars and bottles and bags, and he has fifty dollars remaining in all his life. He spends five dollars on a sim card from the post office and slips it into his phone. For emergencies.

At the rear of the shopping centre, a few workers are unloading crates from a semitrailer. Isaac sits opposite in a bus shelter with graffiti scrawled across the advertisement for a new housing development. *Live the good life*

at Farley Heights has been crossed out and replaced with *Pay the low lifes for Farley Swamp*. Isaac smiles. He likes this town.

When the semitrailer is empty, the driver, a stubby man with a goatee and trucker's cap, climbs into his cab and slowly pulls into the street. The food is locked behind cages on the dock. Isaac thinks of dinner and the endless meals ahead with not enough money.

As he stands to walk away, he spots a rubbish skip underneath the dock. He remembers reading about a bunch of hippies in America who survived by picking wild fruit and vegetables and stealing food that supermarkets discarded. He struggles to recall what they called themselves.

Freebies?

Freebodies?

Freegans! That's it.

They had a manifesto of anti-social stuff like squatting in abandoned buildings, taking clothes from charity bins and dumpster diving. Isaac read about it in the library one lunchtime when it was raining. He laughed when he read the bit about how they reckoned being unemployed was a political statement.

'Whatever it takes to survive,' Isaac says to himself as he walks across the road.

No-one is on the dock. He leans over the skip and looks inside. Plastic bags full of rubbish are piled high. It stinks. He's about to turn away when the sun glints off a can in one of the bags. He leans down, rips open the bag and pulls out the can. Baked beans. It has a dent in the side, but the use-by date is still a year away.

Isaac slips it into his backpack before returning to the skip. He picks up every plastic bag, holds it away from his body and twirls it around looking for bounty.

A dented can of corn.

Underneath the plastic bags is a carton of oranges. Most are soft and green with mould. He holds his breath and pushes these aside before discovering a

few that feel ripe and firm.

Beans, corn and fruit for dessert. Dinner is served.

‘Hey, kid,’ a voice calls from above.

A teenager not much older than Isaac is wearing a store uniform of black pants, a green shirt and a matching cap.

‘That’s rubbish, you know,’ the worker says from behind the cage on the dock.

Isaac isn’t sure how to answer a statement so obvious.

‘You’ll get disease and shit,’ the worker adds.

Isaac holds up the can of corn to show the sealed-in freshness.

‘It’s store property,’ the worker says.

‘In a rubbish bin?’

‘Yeah, well it’s our rubbish bin.’

Isaac steps back and surveys the side of the orange and blue skip. ‘I don’t see your name on it,’ he says.

The worker looks back into the loading dock as if hoping someone will answer for him.

‘No name on this can of corn either,’ Isaac adds. ‘Unless you’re Mr Edgell?’

‘Yeah, well it’s on our land,’ the worker’s voice rises in tone.

‘It’s on Aboriginal land,’ Isaac answers. He remembers his English teacher, Mr Burrum, talking about land rights to the class one sleepy afternoon near the end of term when they were reading a novel by an Indigenous writer.

They look at each other for ages. A stray cat wanders up behind Isaac and sniffs at his backpack before deciding there’s nothing worthwhile inside, taking a few steps and disappearing into a bush. The worker stands his ground behind the cage.

Isaac brushes a fly from his face. ‘Can I take the corn and go now?’ he asks.

The worker looks back into the store before waving a hand.

Isaac holds up the can as if to say thanks. It's not the most exciting conversation he's ever had, but tonight's dinner is sorted.

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7

GRAFFITI

In the evening, Gerry rummages under the bathroom sink and pulls out a can of black spray paint. He shoves the can into his jacket pocket and looks in the mirror. A smiling middle-aged vandal stares back. Someone who should be watching the evening news with his family, not dressed in black trousers, a matching t-shirt, jacket and runners.

Gerry walks out of the bathroom and knocks on Sophie's door.

'Come in,' she calls.

He pokes his head into the room. Sophie is kneeling on the floor, a linocut blade in her hand.

'I'm just going out for a while, before picking your mum up from yoga,' he says.

'Meeting some mates at the pub for darts?' Sophie smiles. She knows where he's really going, but this is their little joke.

'I was a dead-eye as a teenager.'

'And then you discovered poetry,' Sophie says.

'Will you be okay alone?'

Sophie makes a face.

'Sorry.' Gerry grins. 'Stab any intruder with your linocut blade.'

He closes the door and walks through the house, turning on every second light, just to be safe. He picks up the car keys and heads out the door, locking it as he goes. It's a warm night with heavy clouds and a faint breeze from the west. Too warm for the jacket hiding the spray can. Before he starts the car, he removes the jacket and throws it on the back seat.

Gerry drives through town and notices the utes outside the Courthouse Hotel. Darts Night. Maybe he should drop in? Recruit a few potential

graffiti artists from the front bar? He turns left after the pub and cruises down Palmer Street until he reaches the shopping centre car park. He pulls into an empty bay, picks up the spray can and hops out of the car. He keeps to the shadows. An occasional car passes but no-one else is out on foot. It's too late for joggers and too early for drunks.

A few blocks from the car park on the main road into town is a new advertisement in a bus shelter. Gerry saw it on his way to work this morning. The advertisement is only six words, written in large white type on a yellow background. The words shout:

More Mines

More Jobs

More Future

In much smaller type in the corner of the advertisement is the sponsor: the Australian Minerals Council. Gerry sits at the bus shelter, breathing deeply, waiting. He wonders what would happen if he was caught? A fine? A front page in the local newspaper, leading to his dismissal from the council?

Gerry shakes the can, stands and sprays heavy black lines through the words, then he steps back to admire his work. He shakes the can some more and sprays a few words of his own on the advertisement. It now reads:

More ~~Mines~~ Renewables

More ~~Jobs~~ Hope for Our

~~More~~ Future.

Sun Saves.

Coal Kills.

'Bloody Greenies,' he says to himself, before stuffing the spray can into his back pocket and walking away. A truck rumbles past, loaded with sheep. Gerry checks his watch. Time to pick up Dana and return home. That was more fun than sitting in front of a television.

As he walks back to the car, a security van cruises past. It pulls to the

kerb, brake lights glowing. Have they seen the bulge of the can in his back pocket? He takes slow, deep breaths and keeps walking. When he gets close to the car, the driver winds down the window and leans across the passenger seat.

‘Out for a walk?’ the man says. He’s dressed in a black shirt with red lettering on the chest. *Alpha Security*.

Gerry takes a few steps towards the car and leans down. ‘Migraine,’ he says. ‘I tried lying in a dark room but it only makes it worse.’

The man looks him up and down. ‘We’ve had some kids spraying graffiti,’ he says. ‘You seen anyone?’

‘How do you know they’re kids?’ Gerry asks.

‘Who else would it be?’

Someone with a gripe about lying coal companies? Someone who doesn’t like to be bombarded with bullshit while waiting for a bus? Someone ...

‘Bastards,’ the man adds. ‘Still, I blame the parents.’

If only the man knew. The bloke is young enough to be his son. Gerry wants to walk away but is afraid the guard will see the spray-can bulge.

The man’s walkie-talkie crackles. He waves and steers the car back onto the road. Gerry stands on the kerb and watches the car roll down the street until it turns the corner. He hopes there are no teenagers wandering the streets tonight to get blamed for his handiwork. But he’s the one hiding the spray can. He walks back to his car and whistles. It’s a lovely night.

8

RACETRACK

Isaac wanders the town in the evening, searching for a better place than the bus station to sleep. The park looked serene and quiet in the sunlight, but now the fierce shadows of tree branches loom over the bench seats and every rustle from the undergrowth causes Isaac to start. The public toilets at the far end of the park are brightly lit, but the floor is dirty and wet from a dripping tap. Someone has drawn texta porn on the walls, the doors of each cubicle have a gap at the top and bottom, and the place smells of disinfectant and urine. Isaac shivers.

He returns to the back of the supermarket, sits down in a concrete culvert near the skip and cups his head in his hands. Can he sleep here all night with just the streetlights for company? He thinks of his bedroom with clean sheets and a soft pillow, crooked blinds on the window, and a broken lock on the door. The illusion of safety?

A cockroach scurries under his shoe.

Isaac closes his eyes to the forensic yellow light above the loading dock. He retraces his steps throughout the day, trying to find a safe sleeping place in his memory. The library, school and all the shops, even this one, will have security guards patrolling every few hours. McDonald's might be open all night, but the manager would move him on after an hour or two. Toilets, park benches or this concrete mattress?

Isaac shoulders his backpack and wanders around to the front of the supermarket. The lights burn bright but the only people inside are a few shelf-stackers and a man vacuuming the floor. The cleaner looks up as Isaac passes, then goes back to work. Isaac wishes he was as invisible as he feels.

At the end of Main Street, he sees a faded sign pointing south to the

racetrack. It's two kilometres from town. Far enough from prying eyes?

He puts his head down and shuffles along a quiet road. Eventually he reaches the racetrack on the outskirts of town. He walks through the gate and follows the dirt track surrounding a grass enclosure. A corrugated-iron and steel grandstand hides in the darkness.

'Home,' he whispers. It doesn't have sheets and curtains and a lock on the door, but it's a long way from his father.

Isaac climbs the stairs and sits on a dusty wooden stall running the length of the stand. He remembers going to bed late last Friday after putting away the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. His father arrived home after midnight, stumbling around and swearing. It wasn't long before the television was blaring and his father was asleep in front of the screen. Isaac closed his bedroom door and put his pillow over his head but there was no way he could sleep with the noise.

After an hour of tossing and turning, he slunk out of bed, crept into the lounge room in bare feet and searched for the remote. It was on the table near the chair where his father snored. Isaac reached down for the remote. His father shifted on the chair. Isaac froze. After a few breathless minutes, he picked up the remote and pressed mute. He placed it back on the table and turned to go.

The silence felt too loud.

Suddenly his father jumped from the chair, wide awake. He swung an open palm at Isaac, hitting him behind the ear. Isaac raised his arms to protect his face.

'Piss off back to bed,' his father yelled, reaching for the remote and turning the television volume up even louder.

The grandstand roof crackles as evening cools. Isaac rummages in his backpack and puts on a jacket, huddling on the seat like an old sack. He feels bone weary and dirty from rummaging in the skip. He wishes he had an inflatable pillow instead of a rolled-up backpack.

Isaac retrieves the cans and eats baked beans with a side of corn, followed

by two oranges for dessert, looking out over the grass enclosure.

Later that night, after his father had finally turned off the television and gone to bed, Isaac looked out his bedroom window at the streetlight opposite. Hundreds of moths and insects flew around the beam. That's what he was like – unable to escape the danger of his father's drunken light. One day he would fly too close.

Now he's escaped. Just like his mum. The last time he saw her was on the morning of the first day of school when he was twelve. She kissed him goodbye, something she rarely did. He thought she was being soppy after spending so much time together over the holidays. They'd gone to the local pool three times a week. Isaac hadn't cared that the boys from his school had laughed when he'd turned up with his mum. She'd packed sandwiches and a thermos of tea, which Isaac was learning to drink.

That morning, as she kissed him, her eyes had a faraway look. He walked to school and thought about it. A mum who kissed her son, who hugged him close. For once in his life, she was being affectionate.

It took him until the final period to suspect what it really meant. For the rest of class, Isaac's right leg shook. When the bell rang, he was first out the gate. He ran all the way home, the schoolbag banging on his hip, the sweat dribbling down his back. The sun was so bright that afternoon, it faded everything it touched. A heat haze drained the town of definition.

Isaac ran up the back stairs and turned the doorknob. Locked. The back door was never locked. He ran around to the front door and used his key.

The house echoed with emptiness.

He scrambled into each room, even checking in her wardrobe and under the bed.

In the middle of the lounge room he called her name. The tears ran down his cheeks. Five minutes into a life without his mum and Isaac wasn't sure if he was crying because he missed her or because he knew the alternative.

Being alone with his father.

Isaac walked into his bedroom and crawled underneath his bed. Dust

mites hovered above his head. He reached out a hand to catch them in the stale air.

He stayed there for hours, alone in the house.

Until his father got home.

His mother hadn't even left a note.

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9

SWALLOW

Sophie stands at the workstation in Art, the pfeil in her hands. Ms Reynolds lets her bring her own tools rather than use the school's ancient and blunt examples. She's nearly finished her 'Owl on the Cubbyhouse' linocut. Everyone in class has their head down in concentration, working on their end-of-term projects worth a huge sixty per cent of marks. It means you can get the theory completely wrong and still pass if you know how to draw or paint or use a pfeil on linoleum. Sophie is confident she knows enough about theory to bullshit a few marks, and her linocut is looking good.

She smells a musky perfume and steps back from her linocut. Ms Reynolds stands beside her and leans down to inspect her work. Sophie looks at her teacher's thick, dark hair and then at the tattoo of a swallow on her forearm, its wings faded blue. Sophie guesses Ms Reynolds is in her mid-thirties. Today she's wearing a red t-shirt, black skirt and tights with black boots.

'Looking good, Soph,' Ms Reynolds says. No-one calls her that, except her Art teacher. Sophie likes the nickname – it's as though her teacher thinks of her as a friend, not just another student.

'Have you thought about where you want to go with this?' Ms Reynolds says.

Sophie still suspects there isn't a career in art. Her parents are living proof of that. But she loves doing linocuts and can't see herself staying in town forever.

'Maybe a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York!' Sophie jokes.

'Or art college in Melbourne?' Ms Reynolds suggests.

‘Sure,’ Sophie answers. ‘And then New York.’ Both seem a million miles away at the moment.

Ms Reynolds offers a smile and moves on to Trudie’s canvas.

The recess bell rings yet no-one stops working. Sophie looks around the room and suddenly doesn’t feel so lonely. Everyone is focused on their work. All the school losers – the disaffected, the shy, the Aubreys and Trudies, and Sophies, intent on what’s right in front of them. Sophie looks at Ms Reynolds and smiles. Her teacher has deep laughter lines around her black eyeliner. Her classmates begin to pack up and file out of the room.

‘Soph, can you stay behind for a minute, please?’ Ms Reynolds says, nodding at each of the students as they leave.

Sophie rolls her linocut and binds it with a thick rubber band, packs the pfeil into her bag and waits.

Ms Reynolds leans against her desk and ties her hair back with a fluorescent scrunchie. ‘If you want, I can write you a letter of introduction to art college, Soph,’ she says. ‘You’d have the best teachers, quality equipment and the chance to meet others interested in what you’re doing.’

‘Can you loan me a few thousand dollars as well, Ms?’ Sophie attempts another joke.

Ms Reynolds stretches her legs out in front of her and Sophie notices the face of Frida Kahlo is woven into the fabric of her tights. They’d studied Frida in Ms Reynolds’s first year at the school.

‘You’ve got talent, Soph,’ Ms Reynolds adds. ‘And who doesn’t want to live in Melbourne? No matter what the cost.’

Sophie wonders how long Ms Reynolds will stay in town before returning to the city. Along with Ms Sims from English, she makes school life bearable. What is it about English and Art teachers? They get it. They get you.

‘Don’t let the little things stand in your way,’ Ms Reynolds adds. ‘There’s always part-time work and the chance of a scholarship.’

Sophie attempts a smile. It’s nice her teacher thinks the work has

potential.

‘Where did you live in Melbourne, Ms?’ she asks.

Ms Reynolds looks around the room before answering. ‘A terrace in Brunswick,’ she says. ‘Me and three friends.’ She rolls her eyes. ‘Alcohol and boyfriends were involved.’

‘Teachers don’t usually admit to such things.’

‘I spent lots of time getting ... distracted,’ Ms Reynolds says. ‘Now I wish I’d focused more on my art.’

Sophie blushes, thinking of Aubrey, Jay and Tori.

‘You meet a lot of different people at college,’ Ms Reynolds says. ‘It’s a long way from ...’ Ms Reynolds looks out the window.

‘I worry ... whether my work is good enough. If I’ll be able to afford it,’ Sophie says.

‘I survived on pasta and sauce.’ Ms Reynolds’s eyes crinkle. ‘And wine.’

‘That’s what my parents did,’ Sophie admits.

‘You’re only young once, to use the cliché,’ Ms Reynolds says. ‘But, hey, the memories last forever.’ She laughs. ‘Except those shrouded in a drunk haze.’ Ms Reynolds points to Sophie’s linocut rolled up on the desk. ‘You’ve got talent, Soph. Don’t let anything stand in your way.’

‘I remember going to Melbourne with my parents,’ Sophie says. ‘They’d drive the streets of the inner city, trying to recall where they hung out.’

‘You can write your own story, Soph,’ Ms Reynolds adds. ‘One they’d understand.’

Sophie points at the tattoo on Ms Reynolds’s forearm. ‘Did you get that done at college, Ms?’

‘The swallow?’ Ms Reynolds frowns. ‘One of the many mistakes I’ve made.’

Sophie raises an eyebrow.

‘What’s your favourite outfit, Soph?’ Ms Reynolds asks.

‘Jeans and a t-shirt with riding boots,’ she replies.

‘Now imagine you’ll wear them every day. Forever.’

Sophie liked that idea. At least she wouldn't have to wear the school uniform.

Ms Reynolds reads her mind. 'I mean ... forever. Night and day. For graduation. Birthday parties. To weddings. For *ev-er*.' Ms Reynolds speaks the last two syllables slowly, deliberately.

'You could get it removed,' Sophie suggests.

Ms Reynolds laughs. 'A scar to remind me of my younger self.' She grabs her handbag from the desk and walks towards the door. 'Being young is about getting it wrong over and over, and enjoying the process.'

She holds the door open for Sophie and they walk out into the morning sunlight.

'Melbourne, Soph,' Ms Reynolds says. 'Every girl with dreams should go to the city.'

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10

SPRINKLER

Isaac puts his feet up on the seat of the grandstand, the morning sun warming his body. At the far end of the racecourse, a herd of kangaroos feed in the long grass; their heads twitch as they sense his presence. He dares not move as they drop their heads and feed. A joey bounces close to its parents and nibbles at the long grass.

Suddenly Isaac hears a whir. An automatic sprinkler system sprays water in a wide arc over the grass enclosure. The kangaroos, spooked by the sound, leap the perimeter fence in an easy bound.

A plover calls *kekekekeke* from somewhere behind the grandstand.

Isaac walks down to the foot of the grandstand, strips off his jacket, t-shirt, jeans, shoes and socks. Dressed only in underpants, he takes a deep breath, shivering with anticipation. Then he runs across the gravel and jumps the fence easily, feet tingling as he lands on the red dirt of the racetrack before sprinting towards the sprinkler.

Heavy drops of icy water hit Isaac in the chest and face. He opens his mouth to yell; nothing comes but a sharp intake of breath. By the time he reaches the sprinkler head, he's dripping wet. The spray thuds against his body, hard and chilled. Spreading his arms, he stands looking up at the sun. The drops sting his back and kidneys, water cascades down his legs and drips from his arms.

He remembers his father bashing on the bathroom door, yelling at him for using all the hot water.

'Fuck it! Fuck it all!' he shouts, before running in ever-widening circles around the sprinkler until the water is faint against his body, giddiness taking hold. He backs away from the spray, rubbing his hands over his body

to slosh off the drops of water.

Exhilarated, he climbs the fence and walks back to his clothes, chooses a spare t-shirt from the backpack and wipes himself dry. He dresses in new boxers, jeans and his t-shirt.

He lifts the backpack over his shoulder and walks into town, along footpaths of bindi-eyes and couch, past timber houses with aluminium cladding, red-brick bungalows with chimneys from another era, fibro cottages painted pale blue, and a red fire hydrant, sturdy and waiting.

Trucks and farm utilities are out early. Isaac sees his first Akubra on a man wearing a fluoro-yellow work shirt, greasy jeans and riding boots. The cowboy nods hello as he walks into the farm machinery shop.

When he gets to Joan's Cafe, the door is locked. It's dark inside, the only light glowing from the refrigerator. It's eight-thirty in the morning. Isaac glances across the street. The cafe opposite is full and there's a line at the counter for takeaways. He crosses the street and looks back at Joan's. Above the cafe is a flat with leadlight windows.

A man in a white shirt and tie bustles past him into the open cafe.

Isaac studies the menu on the window of Grind. Eight dollars for toast with ricotta and honey. Four dollars and fifty cents for coffee.

He knows where to go. Call him Mr Freegan.

The skip has been emptied overnight but already the workers have added extra bounty, including a carton of firm mandarins dotted with black marks. Isaac peels one and takes a tentative bite. Ripe and juicy. He picks through the offerings like an old lady at a food stand, before loading his backpack.

Breakfast is complete so it's back to Joan's for coffee. She's turning on the lights when he arrives. She comes to the door and unlocks it.

'My first customer.' She smiles, standing aside as he enters.

'I came past earlier,' Isaac says.

'I have to take my grandson to school because my son begins work at seven.'

'I thought you lived upstairs,' Isaac says.

‘I told you I bought something smaller, but not that small,’ Joan says.

She looks across the road and Isaac guesses what’s she’s thinking. An hour’s head start is a lot of lost profit. A wild thought leaps into his head.

‘I could help,’ he says.

Joan laughs and walks to the rear of the cafe where a bunch of aprons hang from a hook. She chooses a cream one covered with images of forks, spoons and knives. ‘No offence, but I don’t think my son would like me leaving Brodie in the care of a stranger,’ she says.

‘No. I could open the shop,’ he says. ‘If you teach me how to make coffee.’

‘It’s more than just coffee,’ she says.

‘I know how to cook and clean,’ he says. ‘I looked after my father for years.’

‘Where’s your mum?’ Joan asks.

Isaac shrugs.

Joan begins wiping the counter.

‘Why ... why don’t we try it for a week?’ Isaac suggests. ‘No pay. Just free coffee.’ Now that he’s thought about it, he can’t shake the idea. He woke at daybreak at the racetrack. If he has to be here to open up at least he’ll have something to look forward to every morning.

Joan stops wiping and looks at him. He holds her stare. He can be trusted.

‘I don’t know.’

Isaac walks behind the counter to the coffee machine before she can say no.

‘It looks easy enough,’ he says, although he has no idea where to start.

Joan wipes her hands on her apron. ‘If you can make coffee,’ she says, ‘I might consider it.’ She walks to the machine and picks up the coffee holder.

‘This is called a portafilter,’ she says, leaning across to the tower of coffee beans next to the machine. ‘You push it against the grinder button until it’s full.’ The grinder whirs and coffee dumps into the filter.

‘Why is it called that?’ Isaac asks. ‘Why not coffee basket, or coffee

container thingy?’ He figures the more he talks, the less chance Joan has of deciding this is a bad idea.

‘Now you tamp the coffee,’ she adds, ignoring his attempt at humour. She reaches for a metal stopper and presses down on the coffee. ‘Just lean on it naturally, not too hard.’ She looks at Isaac. ‘And don’t ask why it’s called tamping, okay.’

Joan hands him the portafilter. The rich smell of coffee drifts between them.

‘I struggled with this next bit when I started,’ she says. ‘Carefully load the filter into the grouphead and then twist, just a quarter turn.’

Isaac leans down and looks under the machine to see where it should go. He slots it in and twists. It locks into place.

‘You’re a natural,’ Joan says. She places a brown coffee cup under the filter and points to a keypad on the machine. ‘This measures the dose. One cup or two.’

‘To infinity and ...’ Isaac pushes the one-cup button. The machine cranks into action and a dribble of coffee pours into the cup.

Joan points to the dial on the front panel. ‘The pressure gauge should be just over the green zone. Perfect. Let it run for twenty-five seconds and then push the button again.’

‘But I didn’t check the time,’ he says.

‘No matter,’ she says. ‘Judge by how much is in the cup.’

‘One grouphead, two grouphead, three grouphead, four ...’ he says.

‘If you keep that up, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.’ Joan smiles. ‘You’ll scare the customers.’

He pushes the button again and removes the cup. The liquid has a golden foam on top.

‘Crema,’ Joan says. ‘The sign of a good coffee.’ She reaches across the counter for the bottle of milk and pours some into a metal jug.

‘Now the hard part.’ Joan attaches a thermometer to the milk jug. She hands it to Isaac and shows him how to place it under the spout.

‘It’s called a steam wand,’ she says. ‘And I swear if you make a joke about magic wands, I’ll—’

‘I’ve seen this bit before,’ Isaac interrupts. ‘You turn this knob and it makes a sound like an aeroplane taking off.’

He turns the knob and dairy fireworks spurt out of the jug all over his shirt, Joan’s apron, packets of Minties arrayed on the counter, and across the floor.

‘Or an aeroplane crashing,’ Joan says.

‘Shit!’ Isaac says, the jug shaking in his hands.

Joan turns off the knob. ‘No bad language behind the counter,’ she says, ‘you dickhead!’

They both laugh. Isaac puts the jug on the counter and leans across to the sink for a cloth. He wipes everything clean.

‘A teenager who cleans up his own mess,’ Joan says. ‘I don’t believe it.’

For the next ten minutes, Isaac boils milk badly. He goes through an entire bottle before getting it right: a thick creamy foam not full of bubbles or boiled beyond taste.

Isaac’s first guinea pig is an old guy wearing a crumpled white shirt and pleated pants. As he walks through the door, Joan makes herself scarce in the back room.

‘G’day,’ the guy says.

‘How can I help?’ Isaac says. He figures that sounds better than, *What do you want?*

‘Flat white, no sugar, takeaway,’ he says. ‘Where’s Joan?’

‘She’s ...’

‘Looking after her grandson again?’ the man says.

Isaac nods, focusing on the task at hand. Portafilter, grouphead, don’t spray milk everywhere. Use a takeaway cup. He’s surprised how easy it is. He tries not to admire the perfect crema on the surface of the coffee.

‘You want a lid?’ Isaac asks.

‘Nah, lids are for girls,’ the man says. He slaps the coins on the counter

and waves goodbye.

Girls? Did he really say that?

Joan comes out from the kitchen, smiling.

‘What time does that cafe open?’ Isaac asks, pointing across the road.

‘Six-thirty.’

‘I’ll open at six,’ Isaac promises. ‘To get a jump on them.’

‘A teenager who cleans up after himself and wakes at the crack of dawn. What planet do you come from?’ Joan says.

‘Can I stay for a few hours to practise on the customers?’ he asks.

‘Sure,’ Joan says. ‘It’ll give me a chance to go to the bank.’ She removes her apron and hangs it on the hook before collecting a small cloth bag from under the sink and walking to the door. ‘Don’t burn the place down or blow up the espresso machine,’ she says. ‘And help yourself to toast and coffee.’

After she’s gone, Isaac makes himself a flat white, careful to get the temperature of the milk just right. He sips it while standing at the counter, waiting. A clock ticks on the far wall, the fridge hums and traffic passes on Main Street. Nobody enters the cafe.

He walks around the counter and circles the room. The walls are wide wooden planks painted light grey. Along each wall is a ledge at shoulder height, painted white. Isaac wonders why there’s nothing on the ledges. They’re perfect for decorations. Or books. Or sale items. He runs a finger along a ledge. It’s spotlessly clean. The tables have metal legs with pink-and-grey flecked tops. They look older than Joan.

The bell above the door sounds. A middle-aged woman wearing a blue dress, white stockings and flat black shoes enters.

‘Good morning,’ she says.

Isaac walks behind the counter to serve her.

‘Where’s Joan?’ she asks.

‘Banking,’ Isaac answers. ‘I’m her new ...’ He can’t think of the word.

‘Assistant?’ the woman offers.

Isaac nods.

‘I’ll have four flat whites to go,’ she says.

Isaac hesitates. Four coffees is a tough way to start.

‘They’re not all for me,’ the woman adds.

He focuses on making strong espresso and frothing the milk correctly. He needs two jugs to fill the order. He hunts around under the counter looking for a container for the takeaway cups. The woman points behind him. Stacked on the rear counter are cardboard carry trays. He grabs one and places each of the cups into the circle cut-outs before handing it across the counter.

‘That’ll be sixteen dollars,’ Isaac says.

The woman offers Isaac a credit card. It takes him three attempts before he gets the EFTPOS machine working correctly. He returns the card and a receipt to the woman. She takes a sip from one cup and pulls a face.

‘Is there something wrong?’ Isaac says.

‘It’s stronger than I expected.’

‘I can add more milk?’

‘No way,’ she says. ‘It’s perfect.’ The woman winks and walks out the door.

Isaac wipes the steam wand and the preparation area around the coffee machine with a damp cloth.

He thinks of Joan waking up one morning to find out she’s not married anymore. Like his dad coming home to find out he’s no longer a husband. Isaac imagines his father now orders takeaway from the Thai restaurant in town. Every evening in the kitchen with bottles of beer and pad thai, eating out of the plastic container so he doesn’t have to wash the dishes. Work, food, beer, sleep. Repeat until death.

Meanwhile Joan begins a new life with a business in town, announcing herself with a sign. He wonders what Joan’s son thinks of his father, whether they visit one another. He needs to be like Joan, to think only of what’s ahead. Not what’s past.

11

ESPRESSO

On Friday morning, Gerry cruises down Main Street on his bicycle. The advantage of being a senior officer at the council means he can start late two days a week. The sunlight mirrors off the shopfront windows and colours the street in an eerie yellow glow. Gerry slows to allow a car to angle park. The tables on the footpath at Grind Cafe are crowded with customers waiting for takeaways. Gerry glances behind him to check for traffic and then veers across the street to Joan's Cafe. He swings his leg off the bicycle as he stops in a car space, lifting the bike onto the footpath and locking it against a parking sign.

It's a few degrees cooler inside Joan's. The formica tables and vinyl chairs remind Gerry of a cafe he frequented in Melbourne years ago. That place was run by an old Croatian couple in Fitzroy. They were slowly going out of business as the espresso bars and Italian restaurants crowded them out. They offered cheap coffee and cherry pastries, and had posters of obscure European football teams on the walls. The cafe represented a bygone era, before the inner city became gentrified. Gerry loved spending time there.

He feels the same about Joan's. The cafe has been in town longer than he has. Where else could he find ageing posters for Polar Ice Cream and Juicy Fruit chewing gum? He once looked in Joan's fridge hoping to discover a leftover carton of Polar. No luck. He searched Google back at the office. Polar was taken over by another company the year the Buzzcocks released their first album.

Behind the counter is a tall young man with curly hair and darting eyes. Gerry's shoulders droop. No-one can make an espresso like Joan. He looks forward to dropping in twice a week. Now he'll have to tolerate dishwasher

as an excuse for coffee.

‘Good morning,’ the young man says.

‘G’day,’ Gerry says, trying to decide whether he should turn, walk out and join the throng across the road. There’s got to be a reason it’s crowded. He glances at the door.

‘Is Joan here?’ Gerry asks. ‘She makes a good cuppa.’

The young man shakes his head. ‘If you don’t like my coffee, I’ll make another one until you do,’ he says.

‘Did she teach you?’ Gerry asks, hoping he hasn’t been too rude.

‘It’s always about the coffee,’ the young man says. ‘You’d think our lives depended on it.’

‘Maybe they do.’ Gerry is relaxed after his bike ride into town, but isn’t fully awake until coffee.

‘I had an old guy in earlier. Akubra, skin like old leather, farmer’s overalls and boots. Do you know what he ordered?’ The boy walks to the coffee machine.

Gerry thinks for a minute, imagining himself in Blundstone boots and owning a few hundred hectares of dry scrubland running sheep and growing grain.

‘Long black,’ he guesses.

‘Skim latte,’ the boy says. ‘And he watched me pour the milk. Told me when to stop. Didn’t want too much.’ He reaches for a cloth and wipes the counter.

Gerry feels the colour rise to his face.

‘Good coffee or your money back,’ the boy says.

‘You’ve gone from making me a replacement to offering a refund,’ Gerry says. ‘And I haven’t even ordered. Maybe I just want a packet of Minties.’

The boy reaches to the circular display of confectionery on the counter and lifts a packet of Minties from the rack. He places it in front of Gerry. ‘Four dollars, fifty, sir,’ he says.

‘You’re a smart bastard,’ Gerry says, a smile on his face so the boy knows

he isn't serious.

'Any extra purchase is a bonus for Joan,' the boy says.

Gerry picks up the packet of Minties. 'These things stick to my teeth. But I'll buy them for the office,' he looks at the boy, 'for Joan's sake.'

'Coffee?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' Gerry says. 'Espresso, please.'

'I'll make it a double on account of the unwanted purchase.' The young man nods at the Minties. He rinses the portafilter under the hot water, wipes it on a towel, fills it with coffee, tamps down gently before attaching it to the machine.

Gerry watches closely, until he realises he's being just like the farmer.

'You can sit down and I'll bring it over,' the boy says.

'Nah,' Gerry answers. 'I'll take it here at the counter. Maybe you can sell me some more confectionery.'

Gerry notices the boy makes coffee with the same intensity his daughter has for her linocuts. A steady hand and eye, biting his top lip as the espresso flows into the cup, his attention not wavering from the job at hand.

The boy removes the cup from under the machine, puts it on a plate and places it on the counter. There's a thick crema on top.

Gerry reaches for the sugar, tips one spoonful in and stirs. He takes a sip. It's as good as Joan's. The boy is watching.

'You can keep the money,' Gerry says.

'Well, you haven't actually paid me yet,' he says.

Gerry laughs. 'You know in Italy, they offer a glass of mineral water with the espresso.'

The young man hesitates for a minute before walking around the counter to the soft-drink fridge on the opposite wall, removing a large bottle of mineral water, unscrewing the cap and returning to the sink for a clean glass. He pours it and places it on the counter beside Gerry's coffee.

'You want ice?' the boy asks.

'Will Joan mind you dipping into profit with the mineral water?' Gerry

asks.

‘If that’s what they do in Italy.’

‘Now I sound like a wanker,’ Gerry says.

The boy doesn’t answer.

‘Truth is, I’ve never been to Italy,’ Gerry adds. ‘I read about it in a book my daughter gave me for my birthday.’ He takes a sip of water then looks to the door, hoping to be interrupted by more customers. The takeaway line at the cafe opposite has grown longer. A car is parked in a loading zone, its hazard lights flashing. Gerry wonders which of the people in the line is the culprit.

‘Have you been overseas?’ the boy asks.

Gerry takes another sip before answering. ‘Thailand. Singapore. Tasmania.’

‘How did they make coffee in Tasmania?’ the boy asks.

‘Two teaspoons of Nescafé Blend 43, milk boiled in a saucepan on the stove,’ Gerry says.

The boy laughs.

‘You know I’m kidding, right?’ Gerry says. ‘Tasmania is bloody beautiful.’

The boy nods. ‘Everyone needs someone to look down upon.’

Gerry studies the boy’s face. He looks far too serious for his age. ‘That’s the saddest thing I’ve heard in ages.’

‘My father taught me that,’ the boy says.

‘Your father’s a smart man,’ Gerry says.

The boy’s lips are tight as if he’s stopping himself from saying what he really thinks.

Gerry reaches into the pocket of his cycling jersey and takes out a credit card. The young man picks up the card machine and places it on the counter before keying the total into the cash register. Gerry waves his card over the machine. It beeps.

‘Sometimes,’ Gerry begins, his voice quiet, ‘our parents teach us the right

way by doing it wrong.'

'Sometimes,' the boy replies, 'our parents don't deserve ...' his voice fades to silence. A clock ticks on the wall.

'I'm sorry,' Gerry says.

The boy shrugs.

'I'll be back in a few days,' Gerry says. He doesn't know why but he reaches across the counter to shake the boy's hand. 'My name's Gerry.'

'Isaac.'

'Good coffee, Isaac. Even a Tasmanian would be proud.'

A few hours later at work, Gerry is still thinking of what Isaac said. He wonders about the young man's home life. Maybe he's met his father at this very counter. An irate man complaining about the latest parking fees or the number of potholes in his street. Gerry should have got the boy's surname and done some illicit searching on the council database to see where his father lives.

And then what?

Gerry remembers the day Sophie was born. Dana holding her so close in the hospital bed, both of them teary. For a moment, it seemed as if time had stood still. Gerry had stroked Sophie's head and made a promise to himself. He'd never lie to her. No matter what.

It was an easy vow to keep in the first few years, but once she started school, the questions began.

Why are some kids so mean?

Are teachers always right?

Who is God and why does he live in the clouds?

Why do you have to eat broccoli?

How are babies made?

He and Dana would glance at one another and do their best to answer honestly, no matter how much it made them, or Sophie, squirm.

Sophie's birth changed everything for Gerry, even this job. He now enjoyed working behind the counter. He decided that if he'd promised to be

honest with his daughter, then he should be the same with everyone. Although he hoped customers wouldn't ask about sex, broccoli or God.

So whenever a customer had a gripe or didn't understand a council directive, Gerry would take the time to help them. No bullshit. No council doublespeak. Just the truth.

It was liberating. A few months after Sophie's birth, he was promoted to senior officer. Apparently, his customer reviews were all five stars. Who'd have thought that telling the truth worked! He owed Sophie, and his beautiful wife, another debt.

Someone coughs from across the room, bringing Gerry back to the council office. He looks at the computer screen. Number eighty-eight is next. He pushes enter and a man wearing a blue singlet and shorts with socks rolled down over work boots strides to the counter. He has age spots on his hands and dirt under every fingernail. Gerry guesses this is going to be about rates.

'How can I help, sir?' It's always best to sound positive.

'My fucking neighbours,' the man says.

'Quite possibly,' Gerry says.

'Hey?'

Gerry decides not to mention the council 'no swearing' policy. He wonders if this angry man has a teenage son named Isaac.

'My neighbours are putting up a twelve-foot-high fence,' he adds.

'Have they asked you to pay?'

'They can get stuffed with that,' the man says.

'It's unfortunate, sir. But you are obliged to pay half the price of a standard fence.'

'Yeah. Not a twelve-foot Great Wall of fucking China.'

'What's it going to be made of?'

'Timber. Horizontal beams the length of the yard.'

'Does it block your view? Or the view of anyone in your family?' Gerry wonders if that's subtle enough.

‘It’s twelve feet high. Course it blocks me view.’ The man’s face turns from red to crimson. ‘And I live alone. Always have.’

‘I mean, does it block your view of anything except their clothes hanging on the Hills hoist?’

The man scratches his chin for a minute. ‘Nah.’

‘Is it going to stop sunshine from bathing your garden in a warm glow?’ Gerry almost laughs at such an image spoken over the council counter.

‘What are you? A poet?’ The man thinks for a bit. ‘But to answer your question. No. The neighbour is south of me.’

‘Then what are you worried about?’ Gerry asks.

‘It’s twelve feet high!’ the man repeats, a vein bulging on his temple.

‘All the better to keep them away from you,’ Gerry says. He leans forward. ‘Let the bastards pay for the monstrosity if it keeps them happy and well away from you.’

The man looks around the office. This is obviously not the conversation he was expecting.

‘Fuck them,’ Gerry whispers.

The man laughs. ‘Is that official council policy?’ he says.

‘Only between me and you, sir.’

‘What’s the council definition of a standard fence then?’ he asks.

‘Simple,’ Gerry says. ‘Get three quotes for a star-picket and wire fence. Offer them half the equivalent of the lowest quote as your contribution.’

‘And that’ll pass council?’

‘Nine times out of ten it won’t even make it to council. Your neighbours will be glad of a few hundred dollars from you.’ Gerry leans close again. ‘And you’ve got a twelve-foot barrier between you and the arseholes for a bargain price.’

The bloke rubs his nose and looks at Gerry. ‘How long you been working here, mate?’

Gerry takes a few seconds to tally. ‘Nineteen years and counting.’

‘From now on,’ the man says, ‘I’m only talking to you. Whenever I’ve got

a problem.'

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12

FUDGE

On Saturday morning, Sophie walks down Main Street, trying to choose a hair salon. It's time to stop her hair falling in front of her eyes when using sharp cutting instruments.

The Final Cut.

Live or Dye.

Curly Girl.

There was no way Sophie was letting anyone who called their business *Curly Girl* near her hair. Sophie had been to *The Final Cut* a few times over the years. Every visit, the woman wanted Sophie to agree to a dye, or something more than a simple trim. *Live or Dye* definitely wasn't an option – Sophie didn't trust anyone who named their business with a pun.

Finally she chooses *Fudge* because she likes the name, sweet and intense. She pushes open the door and sees a woman in her mid-thirties with a short bob reading a magazine in a hairdressing chair. The walls are decorated with advertisements featuring airbrushed models with sleek hairstyles and perfect make-up. So much gloss, so little reality.

Sophie coughs. The woman peers over the magazine and stands.

'Sorry, love,' she says, holding up the magazine. 'Angelina's thinking of going into politics.' The woman indicates for Sophie to sit in the vacant chair.

'It feels like a dentist's chair,' Sophie says as she sits down.

The woman laughs. 'Maybe we want to be comfortable when someone is about to hurt us.'

Sophie wriggles in the chair.

'Not that I plan to hurt you, young lady,' the woman adds, looking back at

her magazine. 'Angelina says we're put on Earth to help people. She should speak to my husband.'

Sophie doesn't know how to respond.

'I'm joking. My husband's alright,' the woman says. 'Now, what's your poison?'

Sophie reaches into her pocket and pulls out a photo of Audrey Hepburn. She offers it to the hairdresser.

'Who doesn't want to look like Audrey?' the woman says. 'She's the ultimate fashion icon.'

Sophie bristles. 'That's actually the last thing I want. I just want to go short,' she says. 'I don't expect miracles.'

The woman touches Sophie's shoulder. 'Sorry, love. I didn't mean to imply ...' She reaches for a pale-yellow cloth to drape over Sophie's body, tying it at the nape of her neck. 'You're gorgeous anyway,' she adds.

Sophie avoids looking at herself. Above the mirror is a poster of a girl on a motor scooter, wearing thigh-high boots and a red miniskirt. She obviously doesn't need a helmet because her sleek bob will protect her. Or so she imagines.

The hairdresser grabs a brush and runs it gently through Sophie's hair, caressing her locks.

'Are you sure?' she says. 'This beautiful long hair. Gone. Replaced with a short pixie cut?'

Sophie nods.

'Why?'

'It falls in front of my eyes when I'm using a blade in art class,' Sophie says.

'You could tie it up in a bun,' the woman suggests.

Sophie crosses her legs under the cloth. What other excuse can she offer? She remembers Butler staring at her hair outside the library when he asked her to his party. That was reason enough. Whatever Butler admires deserves to be snipped.

Sophie looks into the mirror. The woman is waiting for an answer.

‘I’m thinking of going to a party tonight,’ she says.

‘Boys love long hair,’ the woman says.

‘Precisely,’ Sophie replies.

The woman raises an eyebrow and begins cutting. ‘My name is Julia,’ she says.

‘Sophie.’

‘If I had a girl I was going to call her Sophie,’ the woman says, then she holds up three fingers. ‘Brad, Tom and Jordan.’

‘Whoa,’ Sophie says.

‘I started young,’ Julia says. ‘My husband wants a football team.’

‘That’s ... that’s a lot,’ Sophie says.

Julia laughs. ‘I told him he’ll have to outsource the next eight kids.’

‘Or you could be like Angelina?’ Sophie suggests. She remembers reading somewhere that the movie star adopted lots of children.

Julia laughs before continuing to cut Sophie’s hair. Sophie closes her eyes.

She’s had long hair since she entered high school. In Year Seven all of the girls cut their hair short because Sienna Baxter, the most popular girl, went pixie. Everyone wanted to be like Sienna. But not Rebecca. Or Sophie. Sophie wanted to be like Sophie, so she let her hair grow. And grow.

She and Rebecca spent an entertaining year outdoing each other with strange contrivances of hairstyles. Sophie piled her locks into a Frida-inspired concoction winning Ms Reynolds’s nodding approval and a word of warning from the deputy principal. Rebecca preferred beehives stolen from 1960s-dedicated websites. With every new do, the other students kept further away, as if this hairstyle madness was contagious.

Her mum commented first. ‘Your hair’s getting long, Sophie,’ she said, reaching to touch it at breakfast one morning.

‘It’s winter,’ Sophie said, as if her hair could be a blanket. She hoped it could. Not for warmth, but to keep the world away.

‘I had long hair when I was a teenager,’ her mum said. ‘My mum couldn’t

stand it always falling in front of my face.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'You're beautiful. You don't need to hide.'

'Is that what you think I'm doing?' Sophie sighed. Her mother often assumed she knew her daughter's innermost feelings.

'It's what every teenager does,' her mum said.

'Well,' Sophie said, 'then I've joined the club.'

Her dad entered the kitchen and was listening as he squeezed himself an orange juice. He smiled at Sophie.

'What?' she said.

'You could both shave your heads and I'd still think you were beautiful,' he said.

'Chicken,' her mum answered.

'Maybe that's what I'll do next?' Sophie said. 'Full bowling ball.'

Her dad reached for his phone and keyed in a few words. He held it across to Sophie and pressed play. It was a video of a woman with very short hair singing a song about being haunted by the ghost of love. She wore a shimmering dress and had the voice of a breathless angel. In the second verse, a scruffy man came on screen and sang like a drunk. He couldn't hold a note.

Sophie was transfixed. It was like witnessing a car crash. She wanted the angel to return, yet this man with the shabby suit and bad teeth sang as though he meant every word.

The breakfast table was silent except for the lilt and gruff of the video. When it finished, Sophie handed the phone back to her dad.

'Are you telling me I should stop cleaning my teeth and sing badly?' Sophie asked her dad. 'Or cut my hair short like that woman?'

'Neither,' he said. 'But for a while every woman I knew wanted to be like her and every man drank a little too much.'

'Even you could sing better than that guy.'

'Not with the same intensity,' he said.

Later that night, she searched for 'Haunted' by The Pogues on YouTube and watched it a few more times until she understood what her dad meant.

Beauty in ugliness.

Strength in fragility.

Happiness in sorrow.

The clipping of the scissors stops. Sophie opens her eyes and looks in the mirror. She can barely recognise herself. Her nose appears broader, her eyebrows more pronounced, her mouth wider. Without the hair, there's nothing to frame her face. There's just ... skin and bones and teeth and that nose. The cloth over her clothes is covered in dark hair.

'You look beautiful,' Julia says again.

She would say that, Sophie thinks. Fifty dollars to end up like this?

Sophie decides on the safest euphemism. 'I ... I look older.'

'Every teenager wants to look older,' Julia says. 'Don't they?'

Sophie can't answer. She's hypnotised by her own reflection. Her neck appears longer. Her ears stick out. She's not Audrey Hepburn. She's not the woman in the shimmering dress with the voice of an angel.

'You don't like it, do you?' Julia's voice is quiet.

'No ... I mean ...' Sophie says, too quickly. 'It's such a change.'

'I'm sorry,' Julia whispers. She reaches for a soft brush and strokes it across Sophie's neck, removing every last trace of fallen hair. Julia unties the cloth and whisks it away. Sophie stands and looks once more into the mirror. She looks taller. That's a good thing, surely?

Julia walks across to her desk and returns holding her phone.

'I want to show you something,' she says.

Sophie moves quickly away from the chair, wanting to be distant from the crime. The scooter model swans over her.

Julia flicks through files on her phone. 'Here,' she says, holding the phone towards Sophie.

Sophie looks at the screen. It's a faded photo of a teenage girl with permed hair, wearing jeans and a cut-off blouse. The girl looks down, as if

avoiding the camera's gaze.

'Who's that?' Sophie asks.

'The photo was taken twenty years ago, the day after I had the perm. The town rodeo was on that night and I had my first date.' Julia looks at the screen. 'No matter what my parents said, I couldn't believe how ugly I looked with that bloody perm. It took Mum an hour to convince me to stand for a photo. Why would I want a record of that disaster?'

'I know what you're saying,' Sophie says.

'Do you?' Julia's voice is low. 'I'd give anything to look like that again. I keep this photo on my phone to remind me.' Julia places her phone on the magazine and looks out to the street.

'I never went to the rodeo. I rang the boy and told him I was sick,' she says. 'By Monday I'd got used to the ringlets.' Julia laughs. 'The boy met someone else while I sat in my room looking in the mirror.'

'But I don't want a boy,' Sophie says.

'It's not that,' Julia replies. 'It's missing a chance. Any chance of fun. Or laughter. Or, geez, even just a few glasses of alcohol away from my parents. Because of a haircut. Because of my own crazy imagination.'

Sophie reaches into her back pocket for her wallet.

Julia touches Sophie's wrist. 'No,' she says.

Sophie's confused. 'It's a good haircut,' she says. 'I want to pay.'

'I'll make a deal,' Julia says. 'If you like it in a few weeks, come back and pay me.' Julia shrugs. 'If not, then I'm not much of a hairdresser.'

'I can't ...' Sophie begins.

Julia shakes her head and leads Sophie to the front door. 'Remember what Angelina says,' Julia offers. 'We're put here to help.'

Sophie hasn't met anyone before who lives their life according to the quotes of a movie star.

Julia opens the door and Sophie waves goodbye, before stepping out onto the footpath. Her skull tingles. She can feel the breeze on her neck. A new woman. Or just a new haircut?

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13

LIQUORICE

Isaac sits at the front table of Joan's Cafe, wiping his mouth after another breakfast of raisin toast and coffee. Joan sits opposite, wearing a pale-cream apron decorated with sunflowers. Isaac takes a sip of his coffee.

'I gave a middle-aged guy a free glass of mineral water with his espresso yesterday,' he says. 'He told me that's what they do in Italy, so I figured ...'

'That was Gerry,' she says. 'He made a special trip back on the way home to tell me I was onto a winner with my new worker.'

Isaac can't recall the word *winner* ever being used in a sentence to describe him before.

Joan reaches into her pocket and slides four twenty-dollar notes across the table. Isaac stares at the money, confused.

'I did my books last night,' Joan says. 'After taking out costs, that's how much we made opening early, so it's yours.'

'You're not firing me?'

'I'd give you more if I could but things are ...' She shrugs. 'You know.'

'The deal was for free coffee,' he says. 'You've given me raisin toast as well.'

'You deserve it,' she says. 'Opening early helps the business. Like I said, Gerry returned.'

Isaac could use the money but that wasn't part of their agreement. He slides two twenty-dollar bills back across the table.

'We split it,' he says. 'That way you make profit and I get a wage.' He picks up the empty plate and cup. 'Only no more free toast,' he adds.

Joan smacks him on the wrist. 'I'll give free food to whoever I bloody well like.' She grins.

Isaac feels the blood rush to his cheeks. He's never been hit with affection before. He stares down at his wrist as if it's divorced from his body. The coffee cup shakes. He turns away and hurries to the counter so Joan can't see him blushing. He places the crockery in the sink full of warm soapy water and begins scrubbing.

Joan stands and walks to the other side of the counter. 'Maybe I'll put some tables and chairs on the footpath,' she says. 'I might be able afford the council fees if we keep earning more money.'

Isaac smiles but doesn't trust himself to speak.

Joan retires to the kitchen and unpacks a delivery of takeaway cups and paper bags. Isaac watches from the counter, before spying a mop and bucket in the corner. He glances to the street, hoping for customers. Grind Cafe is starting to fill with couples and workers grabbing a treat.

He walks to the bucket, carries it past Joan in the kitchen and fills it at the sink.

'Where did you learn to clean?' Joan asks, reaching into a carton of paper cups.

Isaac shrugs. Inside his head, he can hear his father's snide comments about how he should wear an apron, doing 'girls' work'.

'It beats standing around,' he says.

He grabs the mop and begins cleaning the floor, from the front to the rear. He mops back and forth until the black-and-white linoleum shines. Isaac wonders how many people have walked over this floor, from the Greek couple who owned the shop before Joan to all the customers – the farmers, the CWA ladies, the workers from Main Street. He opens the door and places a wedge underneath to let the breeze dry the floor quickly, before a customer traipses through the damp.

He remembers helping his mum clean the house a few years before she left. It was his dad's birthday and his mum was in the kitchen baking a cheesecake. She promised to make a smaller version for Isaac to take to school the next day. His own birthday present, even though he wouldn't

turn ten for a few more months. She asked him what flavour he preferred. Isaac looked around the kitchen, as if the ingredients on the shelves would announce themselves. He saw a packet of his father's liquorice and pointed. His mum followed his gaze.

'Perfect,' she said. 'Your father will love it.'

Before baking the cakes, she showed Isaac how to mop the floorboards of the lounge room. One sweep of soapy water across the room, wait a few minutes, then a dry mop sweep. Isaac practised maintaining a rhythm, pleased to be avoiding homework and helping his mum, imagining the taste of cheesecake and liquorice together. He wondered if his mum would tell his dad that it was Isaac's idea.

He moved into the bedrooms and mopped those as well. The smell of cooking drifted from the kitchen. He gripped the mop and closed his eyes, imagining his father blowing out the candles, slicing the cheesecake, his mum offering each of them a slice on plates adorned with a huddle of strawberries. They could sit together at the kitchen table. A family. Celebrating.

Isaac mopped faster, as if the sooner he finished, the earlier his dad would arrive home. He couldn't believe he was eager for his dad to return. Usually Isaac kept to his room and avoided the kitchen when his dad and mum were there. Avoided the raised voices and slammed doors. A birthday cake would fix everything. He was sure of that. His father loved liquorice.

Isaac finished the mopping, emptied the bucket and hung the mop out on the clothesline to dry. His toes dug into the long grass. He wondered if he should ask his dad to teach him to mow. Then he could help both his parents. He'd do the housework, the gardening, and all they had to do was be happy. Together. He stared at the mop on the clothesline, the shaggy head hanging loose, water dripping onto the grass. He grinned and ran back into the house, imagining his mum and dad sitting at the table, his mum lighting the candles.

Isaac hears footsteps and looks up from the mop. A man in a crisp white

business shirt and dark-blue pants stands at the counter. He taps his fingers on the countertop and glances across to the cafe opposite. A line of takeaway customers snakes down the footpath.

Isaac leans the mop against the wall and hurries to the counter.

‘Flat white,’ the man says. ‘As quick as you can.’

They both glance out the window again. Isaac feels bad that the only customers Joan is getting are people who can’t afford to wait for coffee opposite.

He focuses on making the best coffee he possibly can. The man swipes the screen of his phone until Isaac places the cup on the counter and pours the milk into it. The man holds up a hand, telling Isaac to stop. Isaac offers him a lid, but the man shakes his head, swipes his card and is gone without so much as a thanks.

He remembers he sat with his mum at the table for two hours, waiting for his dad. The cake, the candles, the knives and forks just right. He suggested she call him. She pressed her hands along the folds of her dress and sighed. After another hour, she made them a dinner of tinned spaghetti on toast. They placed both cakes on a glass tray in the fridge.

Isaac fell asleep before his father arrived home. He was woken by shouting from the kitchen.

‘You used my liquorice for what?’ his father yelled. And then a crash, loud footsteps and the screen door slamming.

Isaac pulled the sheet over his head, listening to the silence that followed. Had his mum told his father the liquorice was his idea? He gripped the sheet, but his hands kept shaking.

He heard a car start and the screech of tyres. A few minutes later, footsteps approached his door, the handle turned, but the door didn’t swing open. The footsteps echoed away, across the freshly mopped floor. The bedroom door to his parents’ room closed. Isaac crept out of bed and walked into the lounge room. He looked at his parents’ door and the light leaking from the kitchen. He didn’t know which way to go.

He padded barefoot to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. Both cakes were gone. The floorboards beneath his feet were sticky. He crouched down and touched them. A smear of cheesecake hung from the skirting board under the sink; a sliver of glass shone in the corner near the cupboards.

Isaac stood up and walked to the rubbish bin near the back door. Inside were the cakes and the smashed glass of the tray. The smell of liquorice and stale tea leaves drifted upwards, making his stomach churn.

It was ruined. All his mother's work. All his cleaning. Tossed into the rubbish bin.

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14

COOKING

Sophie walks down Main Street. She's sure everyone is looking at her, wondering how anyone could allow that to happen to their head. She keeps to the street-side of the footpath away from other pedestrians.

Sophie hears dance music coming from Grind Cafe. She looks inside. Sienna Baxter and a gang of students are crowded around a table. Sienna's at the head of the table, attendant boys on one side, girls opposite. Sophie turns away, hoping they haven't seen her. Would they even recognise her? She walks to the edge of the footpath, trying to decide where to go.

A moment later, she feels a tap on her shoulder and turns. Sienna is standing in front of her, a self-satisfied grin on her face.

'I thought that was you,' Sienna says. 'I love your haircut.'

Sophie reaches up to touch her hair. 'I ... I decided to go short,' she says, moving a few steps away, so the other students in the cafe can't see her talking to Sienna.

'I loved having short hair,' Sienna says. 'Years ago.'

Is this Sienna's way of saying Sophie's out of date? 'I did it for art,' she mutters. That didn't come out right.

'As a statement?' Sienna asks, looking confused.

'No ... no,' Sophie says. 'To keep my hair away from my eyes when holding the linocut blade.' Why does she feel she has to explain herself to everyone?

Sienna glances back into the cafe. 'I better go,' she says. 'I just wanted to say it looks good. It's ... it's brave.'

Sophie can't tell if Sienna's smile is genuine or mocking. She watches the most popular girl in school walk back into Grind, her long hair shiny and

bouncing.

Sophie hurries across the road, ducking into Joan's Cafe. She wants a coffee and somewhere to sit and think.

The bell rings above the door as she enters. There are no customers, only a boy and Joan behind the counter. The place smells of toast and coffee. Sophie nods hello and sits at a table in the darkest section away from the prying eyes of the street. She remembers sitting here with Rebecca a year ago, dreaming their exaggerated futures. Where was Rebecca now she'd been invited to Butler's party? She didn't think she could face it alone. Maybe she should be like Julia and hide in her bedroom. Leave Butler and Sienna and the rest of them to their perfect haircuts, alcohol and pool.

Joan walks towards Sophie's table. Her eyes flicker in recognition.

'You used to come here with a friend,' Joan says, holding a pencil and pad. 'Vanilla milkshakes, with extra ice cream. Is she coming too?'

Sophie is pleased Joan remembers her, even with the new haircut.

'My friend left town,' Sophie says. Is she too old for milkshakes? Probably. Besides, the milk would turn in her stomach every time she thought of attending tonight's party.

'I'll have a long black,' Sophie says.

'I'll let Isaac make it.' Joan looks proudly at the boy behind the counter. 'He's a whiz!'

Sophie watches Joan place the order near the machine, touch the boy on his shoulder and disappear out the back of the shop.

Was Isaac her son? She hadn't seen him at school, but maybe he went to the Catholic school a few blocks away?

Isaac walks from the counter to the fridge and removes a bottle of water. She notices he's wearing faded black jeans and scuffed boots. He's tall, big-boned and lumbers rather than walks. Sophie watches as he makes her coffee. He's focused only on the machine. His hair is messy and curly. He bites his lip when he presses the button for the machine to stop. There's a serious look in his eyes that makes him appear older. The colour rises in her

cheeks as he turns and catches her watching him. Yesterday she could have hidden behind her hair. Now she feels naked.

He brings her coffee to the table and slides it in front of her.

‘Just a second,’ he says. He walks back to the counter and returns with a glass of mineral water, which he places near the coffee cup.

Sophie takes a sip of the coffee. It’s strong and hot. Isaac turns to walk back to the counter.

‘It’s been ages since I came here with my friend to drink milkshakes,’ Sophie says. She needs to talk to someone, anyone, to take her mind off the haircut.

Isaac turns back and looks down at the coffee on the table.

‘I’ve ... changed,’ Sophie adds, not sure if she means her drink of choice or her haircut.

‘I ... I made my first malted milk today,’ Isaac says. ‘It was for a little boy who shared it with his mum.’

He stands a few metres away from the table. Even at this distance, his presence is imposing. Sophie looks at his hands. They’re large with thick fingers. A man’s hands. She can see the veins snaking up his arm. She wonders if he works out, like half the boys in her class. He doesn’t look the type to go to a gym. But he seems strong, in a gentle way. He doesn’t appear to mind just standing there, waiting for her to speak.

‘I’ve just had a haircut,’ she says.

Isaac smiles.

‘I don’t know why I said that,’ Sophie mutters.

‘It looks great,’ he says.

Sophie blushes. ‘No, it doesn’t.’

They stare at each other for a few moments.

‘I don’t know what you looked like before,’ Isaac says.

‘I looked ...’ Sophie realises that any word she adds will make her sound arrogant.

‘Different?’ Isaac suggests.

‘I looked like a girl with long hair,’ Sophie says. She decides she likes this boy. He’s not trying to impress her, and he seems happy to listen, even if what she’s saying is silly.

Isaac glances back to where Joan disappeared.

‘My mother used to shave my head every few months,’ he says. ‘We couldn’t afford ...’ his voice trails away.

‘She hasn’t done it for a while,’ Sophie says.

Isaac shuffles from one foot to the other. ‘I cut it myself,’ he says. ‘Two mirrors and a pair of scissors.’ He rubs a hand through his hair. ‘But mostly, I just let it grow.’

‘Would your mum let you come out tonight?’ Sophie asks. She doesn’t really want to go to Butler’s, but she’d like an excuse to see this boy again.

Isaac looks confused. He stares out to the street.

‘There’s a party,’ Sophie adds. ‘I don’t want to go, but ...’

‘Okay,’ he says.

‘Okay, you’ll come? Or okay, you’ll ask your mum?’

‘I don’t have to ask my mum,’ he says.

Sophie looks past Isaac to the rear of the cafe. ‘I’ll ... I’ll pick you up at eight,’ she says.

Isaac smiles and turns to go back to the counter.

‘I don’t have your address.’ She raises her voice to bring him back.

Isaac walks back to the table. He seems so unhurried, so calm to Sophie, who’s churning inside.

‘I’ll meet you outside,’ he says.

‘Do you live upstairs?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t mind picking you up from your place,’ Sophie adds. ‘Wherever. I can borrow my parents’ car tonight.’

‘I’ll be outside at eight.’ Isaac’s voice is firm.

Sophie wonders what she’s done. An unknown boy with a man’s body who doesn’t say much. She decides to think positively.

‘My name’s Isaac,’ he says, holding out his hand.

‘I know. Joan told me.’ Sophie stands and offers her hand in return. ‘I’m Sophie,’ she adds.

She’s struck by the gentleness of his grip.

‘We can discuss the art of do-it-yourself grooming,’ Sophie says, trying to make light of her invitation.

‘How to cut your own hair without losing an ear,’ Isaac adds.

A boy who doesn’t flinch at self-deprecating humour. Sophie is impressed.

‘I didn’t get the haircut for tonight’s party,’ she tries to explain.

‘It ... it looks great,’ Isaac repeats. ‘No matter what the reason.’

Sophie realises they’re still holding hands.

‘This is a very long handshake,’ she says.

They look at each other for a few moments. Sophie notices him blush as he releases her hand and walks back to the counter where he wipes the area around the espresso machine with a damp cloth. Sophie follows him.

Isaac keys in the details of her order. ‘Four dollars,’ he says.

Sophie offers him a five-dollar note. Does she suggest he keep the change? Before she can decide, Isaac gives her the coin in return.

Sophie sees her reflection in the mirror behind the counter. For a moment she imagines there’s another girl in the cafe.

‘You don’t have to come,’ Sophie says. ‘If you don’t want to.’

Isaac stands behind the counter. He doesn’t answer.

Sophie looks down at her boots. She imagines what he’s thinking. Invited. Then uninvited. She clenches her fists.

‘See you ... tonight,’ she says.

Isaac nods.

On the way home, Sophie tries to make sense of what’s just happened. Inviting a boy she doesn’t know to a party she doesn’t want to go to. Butler’s party ...

She decides to trust Julia’s instincts. Anything is better than a night

looking in the mirror. Plus, she likes Isaac's voice: quiet and assured. And she enjoyed the touch of his skin when they shook hands.

Sophie opens the door to her house. Loud music pumps from the speakers again. Gerry is in the kitchen chopping capsicums and singing along. He's so involved he doesn't hear Sophie walk up behind him.

'Has someone else died?' Sophie asks.

Her dad spins around, the knife in his hands. Sophie realises he takes a split-second to recognise her.

'Sophie!' He smiles. 'Your hair. It's beautiful.'

Sophie rolls her eyes, but she's secretly grateful to have Gerry as her dad.

'Has the singer died?' Sophie asks.

'I don't think so.' Her dad reaches for his phone and quickly types something into Google. 'Nah, still alive. Still playing music,' Gerry says. 'Even if he'll never write anything quite as good as this again.'

Sophie's dad steps towards her, his arms wide. She folds into his hug. He smells of tomato sauce and olive oil.

The song finishes and her dad turns back to the kitchen, knife at the ready.

'You can help, if you want,' he says.

This is what Sophie loves about her dad. No prying questions about why she's had a haircut. No judgement. Just acceptance.

Sophie stands next to him at the sink. She looks out the window to the front garden of cactuses and fruit trees. She hopes the plums will ripen this year, red with juice that dribbles down her wrists after every bite. Her dad hands her the potato peeler. The spuds have already been rinsed and wait in the colander. Sophie begins peeling, letting the skins drop into the stainless-steel sink.

'I asked somebody to a party tonight,' Sophie says. She'd prefer not to tell her parents but she needs the car to pick up Isaac. And she can't lie.

'Good for you,' her dad says.

Sophie waits for his next question. Who? Where? Why?

Instead, her dad tosses the capsicums into a saucepan where they sizzle

with the onions and olive oil.

‘He doesn’t have a car,’ Sophie says, keeping her eyes on the potatoes. ‘Is it okay if I take ours?’

‘Sure,’ her dad says. ‘We’re staying in. Your mum and I, holding hands in the garden, drinking ... Hoping our daughter has a great time.’

‘Maybe you should see if there are any bands on in town?’ Sophie suggests.

‘Tonight?’

‘The Courthouse has music.’

‘Country and western. Or open mic night with five drunks playing Neil Young covers,’ her dad replies.

‘You could read your poetry.’

Her dad laughs but doesn’t answer, focused on cooking.

Sophie peels the last of the potatoes. ‘Thin slices?’ she asks, reaching for a red-handled knife.

‘Your mum loves homemade chips.’ Gerry smiles.

‘I bet she’ll ask me why I cut my hair,’ Sophie says.

Her dad stirs the veggies in the saucepan and turns down the heat before adding some mince and stirring again. The food in the pan sizzles.

‘But not you,’ Sophie adds.

‘Do you want me to?’

‘Not really,’ Sophie replies.

‘I’m a simple man,’ he says. ‘I want my daughter and wife to be happy, that’s enough.’

Sophie remembers reading his poetry the other night. ‘Didn’t you want to be famous like every artist?’

‘I was never an artist,’ Gerry scoffs.

‘You wrote poetry, Dad.’

He stops stirring and looks out the window. ‘Truth is,’ he says, ‘your mum and I hung out with lots of musicians all expecting wealth and fame.’ He tilts his head. ‘I wake every morning beside Dana and wrap my arms

around her.' His voice is quiet. 'Then I have breakfast opposite you. Would being famous make that any less important?'

Sophie looks at her dad. His eyes are moist. He wipes them with the sleeve of his shirt.

'Bloody capsicums,' he says.

Sophie puts down the knife and hugs him again.

The rear door slams.

'Sophie.' Her mum's voice is surprised. 'You've had a haircut!' Dana drops her handbag on the kitchen bench. 'Why did you do that? I thought you liked having long hair.'

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15

SHOPPING

Isaac steps out of Joan's Cafe. The street is parched and hazy, worn out from the heat. It's thirty degrees in the late afternoon. He was pleased Joan let him keep working today, to help with the lunch rush hour of oldies ordering salad sandwiches and shop assistants demanding wraps as quickly as possible. After lunch, Isaac grabbed a broom and swept out the store. Joan paid him with a salmon and salad wrap and when he tried to protest, she joked the fish was past its use-by date.

He walks down Main Street, passing a man in a fluorescent-yellow worker's vest and black pants. A customer from yesterday. They nod at each other. A few days in town and already he's a local. He even has a party to attend.

After Sophie left the store, Isaac gripped the counter, bowed his head and closed his eyes. He'd never been invited to a party by a girl before. At school, he played football on the oval occasionally, but mainly hung out in the library at lunchtime. On the weekend, he'd spend the days in the park with Splotch, reading books in the shade of his favourite tree. He'd close his eyes and drift away with the story he was reading. Or imagine a future where his dad ran away from home just like his mum. One day the old man's there, a sweaty oaf in the lounge, and the next day, gone.

Isaac liked the idea of being left alone in the house with Splotch. He'd rummage through the garage for paint tins and celebrate by repainting the interior walls. A new splash of colour for a better life. As if you can paint your way to happiness.

Like Sophie with her new haircut. Isaac didn't trust himself to look at her for too long in case she thought he was a freak. She was more than pretty.

But he's not saying words like that. Not to a customer. He liked her boots. Black and shiny but worn at the heel, as if she spent most of her days wearing them on a farm. Does she live on a farm? Isaac hopes she didn't have a horse. He'd never met anyone with a horse, and for some reason he knew he couldn't trust them. He laughs. How illogical was that? Like dreaming that one day his father would leave and never come back.

It didn't matter now. His father would still be there, sitting in the lounge room waiting for his son to return. Isaac wonders if the hammer remained in the gutter where he threw it. A reminder of that final afternoon.

The colour rises in his cheeks. He thinks of Sophie. And Joan. And that man who came in yesterday and asked for an espresso. People who know nothing about him and his past. He feels proud.

Maybe he could repaint the walls of his life and these people were the first brushstrokes?

He turns into a shopping arcade and follows an old man with a walking frame into Kmart. He's glad Joan gave him some money. A Saturday night party means a new t-shirt. Or should he buy a collared shirt? He wanders through the racks, touching the fabric of a few choices. Ever since his mum left, Isaac bought his clothes from the Salvos. His father never gave him enough to shop anywhere else.

He notices a middle-aged shop assistant keeping an eye on him. He'd have bad taste to risk stealing any of these shirts. Finally he chooses a black cotton t-shirt and carries it to the change room. He closes the door of a cubicle and takes off his faded t-shirt to replace it with the new one. It fits. He lifts the new shirt over his head and catches a glimpse of the red welt on his hip. He averts his eyes and puts his old t-shirt back on.

Three weeks ago, he decided to fight back. His father hit him twice across the back using his leather belt, held at the buckle. Isaac should have tolerated the ear-bashing and retreated to his room. Instead, he called his father 'an arsehole' and swung a right hook. It connected with his father's cheek and sent him reeling backwards.

They stared at each other in shock.

Then the old man lunged forward, grabbed Isaac by the scruff of his shirt and punched him once in the stomach. The breath rushed from his lungs.

His father stepped away, swapped the belt from one hand to the other so the buckle hung loose and swung it at his son.

Isaac twisted and was struck with a glancing blow on the hip by the belt buckle. He yelped in pain.

His father stepped closer and threatened, 'You ever hit me again and you're gone.'

Isaac could feel the hot breath on his face. He nodded, afraid to speak in case he called his father another name.

Isaac bathed the wound in a mixture of Dettol and warm water. The skin around the cut was bruised purple. He wasn't sure if it needed stitches or not. Visiting the hospital would mean being asked questions. He cut up a tea towel and used the fabric to dress the wound.

He forged a note in his father's handwriting to excuse himself from Physical Education at school. He sat watching his class play football and dreamt of running away from home.

Isaac remembers the moment his fist hit his father's face. He thought it would be satisfying to hurt someone who'd caused him so much pain.

It wasn't.

He felt ashamed. Did that punch make him as bad as his father? Would his future be decided by who he could bully or who would stand over him?

He bows his head in the change room. He isn't like his father. He'll never be like his father. He'll never raise his fist in anger again.

'Are you okay in there?' a female voice calls from the other side of the cubicle.

Isaac opens the door. The shop assistant is holding a walkie-talkie.

'Sorry,' she says. 'You seemed to be taking a long time.' She glances down to the backpack in Isaac's hand.

'You can search it if you want,' Isaac says.

The woman looks around, checking for other staff.

‘It’s store policy.’ Her voice is quiet. ‘Whenever anyone is in the cubicle for longer than necessary, we’re supposed to search.’

Isaac opens the zipper and holds the bag towards her. She pushes it back.

‘It’s okay, son,’ she says. ‘Who’s going to steal anything from here?’

‘I’m buying a t-shirt for ten dollars,’ he says. ‘Do you reckon it’s worth it?’

She looks at the black t-shirt in Isaac’s hand. ‘This is where I’m supposed to say we have the lowest prices in town,’ she whispers.

Isaac laughs.

‘It’s okay, this one fits,’ he says. He begins to walk away, then turns. ‘Hey, do you know Joan’s Cafe?’

The woman nods.

‘You come in any time before ten in the morning and I’ll give you a discount on the coffee,’ he says, holding up the t-shirt. ‘For your help.’

The woman smiles.

Isaac pays with cash at the register and slips the t-shirt into his bag. He walks outside into the fading sunshine.

He spends the rest of the afternoon in Bubbles and Squeak Laundry. Isaac wears shorts and his new t-shirt. Everything else goes in the wash. He sits on the hard plastic chair against the wall and watches his clothes tumble.

He remembers seeing a documentary on the largest slum in the world, a shanty town in the centre of Mumbai, India. A million people crowded on a patch of ground the size of this town. Isaac noticed the girls wore white blouses and starched skirts, the boys in spotless shirts and pressed pants – despite living in makeshift homes of tin and cardboard surrounded by open drains and narrow dirt alleys. The children the interviewer spoke with were always smiling and happy to be going to school every day.

Isaac felt he wasn’t homeless if he had clean clothes, if he slept under shelter, if he scrubbed his body each day at the sprinkler or under the tap at the back of the grandstand. He had a job. He could afford the laundry.

Where he placed his head at night didn't mean so much, as long as it was far away from his father.

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16

PARTY

Sophie sits in her parents' car parked a few blocks from Main Street. She checks her watch and looks into the rear-view mirror. Her hair hasn't grown since this afternoon. No backing out now. She's wearing jeans and a faded green shirt, the sleeves rolled up. Her fingernails are painted the same colour and she doesn't understand why. Green fingernails? Who does that? She's compensated by wearing her mum's favourite red lipstick. Maybe Isaac will think she's colourblind.

Isaac.

The only things she knows about him are his name and where he works.

She leans forward and switches on the ignition. Now or never.

She sees him standing in the shadows outside Joan's Cafe, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. He shuffles from one foot to the other and Sophie wonders if he's as nervous as she is. She lets out a long breath, flicks the indicator and steers the car over to the kerb.

He steps forward and tries to open the passenger door. It's locked.

Sophie fumbles with the button. Hot air rushes in when the door opens. 'Sorry,' she says. 'It locks automatically.'

Isaac hops in and reaches for his seatbelt.

Sophie notices he smells of apple soap. Cuts his own hair, uses soap, doesn't appear to indulge in manly deodorant, and isn't a boy from her school. The evening has started well.

'It's too hot, hey,' she says, steering down Main Street, switching the air con up further. She turns on the CD player and Pete from the Buzzcocks falls in love all over again.

'It's my parents' car,' Sophie says. 'But I like their music.'

‘I ... I won’t know anyone at the party,’ Isaac says.

‘You’ll know me.’

A man steps onto the pedestrian crossing ahead. Sophie slows and glances across at Isaac. She remembers feeling warm all over when they shook hands in the cafe.

On the sleeve of his t-shirt is a small sticker. She reaches across and Isaac jumps.

‘Sorry,’ Sophie whispers. ‘I was going to remove the tag.’

Isaac peels it away, rolls it into a small ball and stuffs it into his jeans pocket.

‘I bought a new t-shirt,’ he says.

Sophie takes a hand off the steering wheel, showing her painted fingernails.

‘And I chose the stupidest colour in the world to paint my nails.’ She grins.

Isaac breathes out slowly. ‘And cut your hair,’ he adds.

‘We’re new people,’ Sophie says. She turns the car into a wide street with flowering jacaranda trees down both sides illuminated by the streetlights.

‘It’s a tunnel of colour,’ Isaac says.

‘I know a bend in the river where no-one ever goes,’ Sophie says. ‘The jacaranda blooms float on the surface. My parents and I swim in purple.’

Isaac glances across at Sophie. ‘You swim with your mum and dad?’

‘Sure. Dad taught me how to swim when I was little.’

Sophie checks the GPS on the dash and follows the red line to the outskirts of town. She slows to rattle over a narrow bridge across the river then points a green fingernail west.

‘Patchett Bend is a few kilometres downstream,’ she says. ‘Are you free next Saturday?’

Isaac nods.

She can’t believe she’s asked him out on another date before they’ve finished their first one. ‘Where do you live?’ Sophie asks.

Isaac tenses. 'Near ... near the racetrack,' he says.

'Do you go to the Catholic school?'

'I've only lived here for a few days,' he says.

Sophie looks at him, confused. 'But Joan,' she says. 'She's your mum, right?'

Isaac shakes his head.

She tries to stop herself from asking too many questions.

In the distance is a house with fairy lights strung between the trees. Sophie slows the car, indicates and turns onto a narrow bitumen driveway. She steers the car under an archway of burnished steel topped with a heavy timber sign announcing *Highton Estate*. The car stutters over a cattle grate. A bunch of cars are parked in rows on a grassy patch near the willow trees. Sophie pulls in beside a white HiLux utility. She switches off the engine and looks at Isaac.

'Joan is not your mum,' she says. She can hear music echoing through the trees. A girl laughs in the distance.

'Mum left home when I was twelve,' Isaac says. He wriggles on the leather seat. Sophie waits for him to continue. He stares at the full moon.

'And your dad?' Sophie is almost afraid to ask, seeing the look on Isaac's face.

'He stayed,' Isaac says.

Sophie realises she hasn't switched off the headlights. The beam illuminates the hanging branches of the willow. She flicks the switch and they're enveloped in darkness. Neither of them speaks for a long time.

'Sometimes at home,' Sophie says, 'we turn off all the lights and sit in the garden, looking up at the sky. Dad calls it "Meditation for Beginners".'

'You talk about your dad a lot,' Isaac says, staring into the darkness. 'I never want to mention mine again.'

Sophie doesn't know why but she reaches for Isaac's hand. He jumps again but she doesn't let go. She's glad they're in darkness and she's alone with this boy, holding his hand.

Isaac places his other hand on hers as if cradling their embrace. They sit like this for a long time.

A beam of headlights flickers past them as another car arrives.

‘Do ... do you want to go inside?’ Sophie asks. She’d prefer to stay here, close to Isaac, touching.

‘I guess,’ Isaac says. ‘After all, I did buy a new t-shirt.’

They both hop out of the car. Sophie waits for Isaac to come around to her side, and together they walk down the driveway towards the music and laughter. A bottle crashes and Sophie flinches. She wishes they’d stayed in the car.

Their steps slow as they get closer to the crowd. A bunch of people stand on the verandah of a two-storey weatherboard house looking down towards the pool where three girls in bikinis sit on the diving board sharing a joint. A few boys and a girl take it in turns to dive-bomb into the pool from the other end. Most of the girls are wearing loose dresses over swimsuits and the boys wear boardies and t-shirts. Sophie and Isaac are the only ones wearing jeans.

Sophie leans in close to Isaac. ‘I didn’t tell you it was a pool party.’

‘I don’t have boardies anyway,’ he replies.

Sophie wants to hold his hand but is too nervous. Her eyes dart around the group near the pool. As soon as she makes eye contact with Butler, he breaks from the group and walks towards her. He’s carrying a can of pre-mixed rum and cola and is bare-chested, wearing only baggy board shorts.

‘Sophie?’ he says. ‘I didn’t recognise you.’

For a few minutes in the car with Isaac she’d forgotten about her hair.

‘Who’s this?’ Butler says.

Isaac holds out his hand. ‘Isaac,’ he says.

Butler flicks his hand across Isaac’s palm. Sophie isn’t sure if it’s a secret boy’s handshake or if Isaac has been dismissed.

‘Where’s your bikini, Sophie?’ Butler says, inching closer.

‘I decided to wear something comfortable,’ she says, surprised at the edge

in her voice.

Butler turns to the crowd and shouts, 'Sophie will be swimming naked!'

Everyone laughs.

'I've got my phone ready,' a boy yells.

Sophie wants to push Butler in the chest and keep pushing until he falls into the pool.

'How about you?' Butler says, looking at Isaac. It's obvious he's already forgotten Isaac's name. 'Did you bring boardies?'

'Nah,' Isaac says. 'But don't worry, I'll jump in and save you if you're drowning.'

Butler sucks in a deep breath. 'Overdressed and uninvited,' he says. 'Lucky I'm a welcoming host.'

Sophie sees the colour rise in Isaac's cheeks.

'There'll be a price to pay,' adds Butler. Sophie sees Isaac clench his fists and look down at Butler.

'Anyway,' Butler hesitates, 'we'll talk about it later.' He turns to Sophie. 'I liked your hair better when it was long.'

'Yeah, well it kept flopping into my eyes,' Sophie says. 'I felt like a real wanker constantly flicking it away.' She imitates Butler's hair sweep. 'I'm sure you understand?'

Butler does the dead-eye stare before walking back to a group smoking and drinking around a picnic table. He wriggles in between Isabella Peruzzi and Jessica Hamilton, putting an arm around each of their shoulders.

'These people are your friends?' Isaac asks.

'Not really,' Sophie says, before grabbing Isaac's hand and leading him across the front lawn, up the stairs and onto the verandah. On a long table are cardboard boxes of pizzas and sausage rolls. A large bathtub is full of ice, cans of rum and cola, bottles of beer and soft drink. Sophie chooses a beer and offers it to Isaac.

'Do you want me to drink it,' he smiles, 'or hit him over the head with it?'

Sophie laughs, reaching for a Coke and twisting the cap. She tosses the

cap into the bathtub and takes a swig.

‘I wish I could have a beer,’ she says. ‘But I’m still on P-plates.’

They both seek out the darkness at the end of the verandah. A wisteria vine trails from the ceiling, quilting the space with fragrance. Sophie leans against the verandah railing and looks at everyone whooping it up.

‘I don’t know why he invited me,’ she says. ‘We avoid each other at school.’

‘Maybe it’s a numbers thing,’ Isaac says.

Sophie tilts her head, not understanding.

Isaac casts his eyes around everyone at the party. ‘There are twice as many girls as boys,’ he says.

Sophie’s surprised she hadn’t noticed.

‘I was invited to make up numbers,’ she says, taking another sip.

She leans against the railing beside Isaac. They watch a group taking selfies on a picnic blanket. The girls on the diving board light up another joint and practise blowing smoke rings. Sienna Baxter sits at a table surrounded by a group of boys, hanging on her every word.

‘Tell me something no-one else knows,’ Sophie asks.

‘That’s easy,’ Isaac says. ‘I bought a new t-shirt.’

‘You know what I mean,’ she says.

‘It’s true,’ Isaac says. ‘You got a new haircut and your parents know. Now all your classmates know as well.’

‘Okay,’ Sophie decides. ‘I’ll tell you a secret.’ She closes her eyes, hoping something will come. Hypnotic music booms from under the plane trees and a few girls shriek with laughter. ‘My best friend left town last year and since then I’ve been alone at school. My year of being a monk,’ she says, blushing. ‘Apart from that, I have nothing to hide from anyone.’

‘We all have something,’ Isaac says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Our feelings,’ Isaac says.

Sophie has never met a boy who is so sensitive.

‘My feelings?’ Sophie ponders. ‘I love my parents. I don’t understand boys. Doing linocuts brings me peace. I wish my feet were smaller and my boobs were bigger. My Art teacher is cool. Butler is a dickhead.’

They look at each other.

‘That’s the first time I’ve ever heard someone mention parents and boobs in the same breath,’ Isaac says.

They both laugh. Sophie notices Butler has spotted them on the verandah. He’s talking among a bunch of boys, pointing at them.

Isaac follows her eyes. ‘Do you think there’ll be trouble?’ he asks.

‘How fast can you run?’ She tries to smile but can’t. She wishes Rebecca were here. She’d know what to do. Time to stop living in the past.

‘We’ll hide here in the darkness,’ she adds. ‘Besides. *You* have to tell *me* a secret now.’

‘You do understand the definition of a secret, don’t you?’

‘Come on,’ Sophie says, ‘I bared my monk’s soul.’

‘Okay,’ he says, ‘I ... I have a recurring dream.’

‘Don’t tell me it’s where you’re being chased by a gang of angry schoolboys,’ Sophie interrupts.

‘It’s weird,’ he says. ‘The characters in the dream change but the outcome is always the same.’ He looks towards the swimming pool. ‘Last night it was about an old couple dressed in clothing from centuries ago. They were crossing a river on a barge when it got hit by a storm of logs rushing downstream. They both get thrown into the water.’

Isaac turns away from the verandah and looks into the bush beyond the property.

‘At this point in my dream, I always become one of the characters. Last night I was the husband trying to save my wife. The logs, the rapids and the heavy clothes pulled us under. I kept reaching for her hand.’

Isaac looks at Sophie. ‘Then I woke up. Alone. Useless,’ he says.

‘Maybe we all feel like that,’ Sophie whispers. ‘Unable to control what’s right in front of us.’

They hear footsteps behind them.

Butler and four boys stand in the middle of the verandah. A group of girls including Sienna watch from the picnic table in the garden.

‘You two aren’t getting into the spirit of the party,’ Butler says.

‘So?’ Isaac answers.

‘So I think you should leave,’ Butler says. ‘Sophie can stay.’

Sophie reaches for Isaac’s hand. She decides no matter what, she won’t let go. Unless they have to fight. She’d be the first one to punch Butler if it came to that. Behind Butler she recognises his mates from Science: Michael, Brandon, Thomas and Lachlan.

She feels Isaac’s grip loosen as if he’s ready for action.

‘Isaac’s my friend,’ Sophie says.

‘Your friend is drinking my beer,’ Butler replies.

Isaac puts the bottle to his lips and drinks the rest in one gulp. Sophie notices him change his grip on the bottle so he’s holding the neck in the palm of his hand. It looks like a weapon.

‘What?’ Butler says, looking from the bottle to Isaac. ‘Are you going to take us all on?’

‘No,’ Isaac says. ‘Just you.’

‘I’ve got friends,’ Butler says. ‘What have you got?’

‘He’s got me,’ Sophie replies. ‘I’ll kick you after Isaac’s hit you with the bottle.’

‘Whoa.’ Butler smirks. ‘Tough girl with the butch haircut.’

‘Screw you! We’re leaving.’ Sophie steps towards Butler, still holding Isaac’s hand, but moving to keep herself between the two boys. She walks closer to Butler than she’d prefer and notices for the first time they’re the same height. She tightens her grip on Isaac’s hand and wonders if he knows how nervous she is.

Butler hesitates before moving to the side of the verandah. His four mates do the same.

Sophie leads Isaac past the gang and back along the verandah.

‘Lucky you’re with a girl,’ Butler calls.

Isaac reaches down into the bathtub and picks up another beer and Coke.

‘Thanks for the beer,’ he says.

They walk down the stairs and through the garden towards the car. It’s then she notices the music has stopped. Sienna hops up from the picnic table. Sophie looks at her. She can trash talk Butler, but having to take on the most popular girl in school?

Sienna just nods at her, then sits down again.

Sophie’s hands are shaking now she realises what she’s done. The music starts again.

She unlocks the car and hops inside, before strapping on her seatbelt and starting the ignition. ‘Let’s go somewhere to talk,’ she says.

‘My place,’ Isaac says. ‘I’ll show you where.’

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17

STARS

Gerry and Dana sit outside in the garden. A light breeze twitches the leaves of the photinia hedge. Gerry looks up at the stars and thinks of buying a telescope. Not that he knows anything about astronomy. But with all this on offer every night, it seems a shame not to be closer. He could buy a book and study? Or download an app? There's an app for everything. He takes another sip of beer and tries to calculate the bottles he's drunk in his life. As many as the stars he wants to admire?

Dana checks her watch and reaches for her wine glass.

'She'll be home in good time,' Gerry says.

'It's not the party I'm worried about,' Dana says. 'It's what comes after.'

Gerry reaches for his wife's hand. 'Do you remember the parties we went to when we were young?' he says.

'Drugs and beer and we didn't get home until daybreak,' Dana shoots back.

'Precisely,' Gerry says. 'But we're still here. Nothing bad happened.'

'Except I married you and not Jonah,' Dana answers.

They both laugh.

'I could get a pair of leather pants if you want?' Gerry says.

'You in lycra is more than enough,' she says.

Gerry takes a sip of beer and thinks of his daughter, her new haircut, the way she listens to his music and tries to make sense of it, the intensity of her focus on linocuts. He's pleased Sophie is out at a party, no matter how much he and Dana worry.

'Sophie's more mature than we were at her age,' he says. 'And I doubt the country version of Jonah Negroni will be enough to lead her astray.'

‘Are you saying I was easily led?’ Dana asks.

‘You chose me,’ Gerry says.

Dana stretches out on the chair. ‘So, you’ll sleep easy tonight if Sophie isn’t home?’ she says.

‘No way,’ Gerry says. ‘I’ll stay awake until I’m sure she’s safe. But that’s because we love her, not because we don’t trust her.’

‘Parenting, hey?’

‘Yeah, it’s fucked.’

They raise their glasses and toast the moon and stars and the quiet garden.

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18

GRANDSTAND

Sophie drives back to town in silence, thinking that she shouldn't have put Isaac in that situation. What if Butler had gone for him? Five boys against Isaac. What could she have done but jump into the fight? Get punched herself?

Isaac provides directions by raising his hand and pointing left or right. Revellers drink on the footpath outside the Courthouse Hotel. A row of utes are parked on an angle and music pumps from the lounge bar.

'Do you really want to know a secret?' Isaac asks, interrupting the silence.

'Sure,' Sophie says. She steers through a roundabout. At the next intersection, a police car waits on the verge, facing the hotel. Sophie slows even though she's not speeding.

Isaac's voice is quiet. 'I don't actually have a home.'

'What ... what do you mean?' Sophie says. 'Everyone has—'

'I'm sleeping in the grandstand at the racetrack.'

Sophie grips the steering wheel and tries to make sense of what he's just said.

'Anyway, it's pretty dark out there,' Isaac adds. 'So we could hang out in town instead. If you prefer?'

The car headlights illuminate the sign for the town racetrack. *Next Meeting 31st of March.*

'I'd rather be away from cop cars and drunks,' Sophie says. She glances across at Isaac. 'But if you try anything, I'll pretend you're Butler and smack a bottle over your head.'

The streetlights and houses disappear. Sophie flicks to high beam. Grasslands and bitumen. Isaac stares into the paddock darkness as Sophie

slows the car and steers it through the open racetrack gate. The tyres crunch over gravel. She pulls in beside the grandstand and switches off the motor.

Darkness.

Isaac opens the door and the interior light flicks on.

‘Do you want to sit in the grandstand?’ he asks.

Sophie grabs the bottles. She trusts Isaac. He’s not like Butler and his mates. She steps out of the car.

Isaac leads her through the swinging gate and up the rickety wooden steps onto the grandstand. A cool breeze rustles between the stalls as they climb to a middle rung illuminated by moonlight.

Isaac sits on the wooden bench seat. ‘This is where I sleep.’ He reaches for his backpack jammed with clothes under the seat. ‘And this is what I own.’

Sophie sits close by and hands him the beer. Corrugated iron, hardwood, arching steel beams, a net strung across to stop the pigeons roosting in the ceiling.

‘You’re homeless,’ she whispers.

‘Clean clothes, a firm bed, a roof over my head, a job,’ Isaac says. ‘There’s heaps of people doing worse than me.’

Sophie looks out over the racetrack, thinking of all the pillows on her bed, the crisp white sheets, the Balinese throw her mum bought for her.

‘I’ve never been in a boy’s bedroom before,’ she says.

‘A boy drinking beer, and a bedroom,’ Isaac says. ‘Your parents would say it’s a dangerous mix.’

‘Nah,’ Sophie says. ‘They trust me.’

Isaac twists the top off his beer. ‘Do you know,’ he says, ‘every time you mention your parents, it’s positive.’

Sophie takes a sip of Coke, thinking of her parents. She imagines them both right now in the garden, with their beer and wine and the stars.

‘Dad has an embarrassing range of corny jokes and Mum wants to know everything I think and do, but ... I’m not complaining.’ She smiles.

They both look out over the grass enclosure. Clouds scud across the horizon and a curlew calls through the night.

‘How long will you live here?’ Sophie asks.

Isaac shrugs. ‘As long as I need to. The automatic sprinklers sprayed the grass yesterday, so I got a free shower. The rest of the time I use the tap under the grandstand. I do my laundry in town.’

‘What about food?’ Sophie can’t help herself. She’s amazed that someone her age can live like this.

‘Joan gives me breakfast,’ he says. ‘Even though I offer to pay. The other day I stole stuff from the skip behind the supermarket.’

‘Seriously?’

Isaac nods. ‘Tinned food mostly,’ he says. ‘So I know it’s safe.’

Sophie thinks of her dad cooking dinner. The time and effort he puts into each meal. How she helps her mum lug the shopping bags from the car to the kitchen. The bounty of their cupboards. Three types of pasta, soba noodles, packets of rice, tins of salmon, biscuits, a bowl of fruit in the centre of the dinner table. Enough food to keep Isaac happy for weeks. She feels ashamed.

‘I’ve learnt the location of every fruit tree in town,’ Isaac says. ‘We couldn’t afford fresh fruit at home. Now I pick what I like.’

‘Can’t you go to Social Services?’ Sophie says.

Isaac shakes his head.

‘There’d be financial support,’ Sophie adds. ‘Isn’t there something like rent assistance and—’

‘I want to make it on my own,’ Isaac interrupts.

‘How ... how old are you?’

‘Seventeen,’ Isaac answers.

Sophie closes her eyes. Her life revolves around school, her mum and dad, and her next linocut. At the end of next year, she’s hoping to move to Melbourne to begin art college. Everything is so easy, so clear-cut. The boy sitting beside her lives a million miles away.

‘I won’t stay here forever,’ Isaac adds. ‘But first, I want to help Joan get more customers.’

‘Isn’t it cold during the night?’ Sophie looks up at the corrugated-iron roof.

‘I’m thinking of buying a sleeping bag,’ Isaac says. He points across the racetrack. ‘Every morning I wake to kangaroos.’

‘You should get a job in real estate,’ Sophie says, adopting a salesperson’s voice. ‘Elevated position, country views, kangaroos!’

‘Split-level living space,’ Isaac adds.

‘Inviting aspect.’

‘Dual showers.’

‘Unique garden!’

Isaac puts his feet up on the seat in front. ‘What we own,’ he says, ‘isn’t who we are.’

Sophie thinks of Butler’s party. The swimming pool, the unlimited alcohol, the stack of pizzas on the verandah. Butler drives to school every day in his shiny new ute, a birthday present from his parents. His family own a sheep station and Butler can work on the farm once he leaves school. No need to think of a future when it’s all in front of you, especially when your father is the mayor of the shire council. Which, by default, makes him her dad’s boss.

She leans back and closes her eyes, thinking of school on Monday and the reception waiting for her. Butler will have an arsenal of snide comments, egged on by his mates. Sienna, Jessica and Isabella will whisper among themselves as she walks past. She’ll be judged and found wanting, like she has been all year.

Fuck them. Fuck them all, she thinks.

Without opening her eyes, she reaches for Isaac’s hand. The night breeze plays across her skin. She opens her eyes and checks her watch. Time to go. She takes her phone from her pocket and swipes to unlock it.

‘What’s your number?’ she asks.

‘I ... I don’t know,’ Isaac says.

‘What?’

‘I bought a new sim,’ he adds, before pulling the phone from his pocket.

‘Maybe tell me yours, and I’ll call you now?’

Sophie reads her number to Isaac as he keys it into his phone and then presses *call*. Her phone rings for a second before Isaac hangs up.

They walk down the stairs. Sophie stops at the foot of the grandstand and looks over the racetrack. A single cicada starts thrumming, and a few seconds later the chorus hums. A flap of wings applauds in the darkness. A distant car stalks the highway.

‘Maybe I could stay over one night?’ she asks. ‘I’ll bring the sleeping bags.’

‘Sure,’ Isaac says. ‘We’ll get takeaway.’ He leads her to the car.

She opens the door. ‘I don’t like leaving you out here.’

Isaac shrugs.

‘You could come to my place?’ she adds.

‘I’m not the type parents like.’

Sophie feels the blood rush to her cheeks. ‘You don’t know my parents.’

‘It is what it is,’ Isaac says.

‘What does that mean?’

Isaac attempts a smile, but doesn’t answer.

‘Don’t judge me,’ Sophie says. ‘Or my parents.’

Isaac nods. ‘I’m okay here,’ he says.

Sophie hops into the driver’s seat.

‘Sophie,’ Isaac says.

She looks up.

‘Thanks for inviting me to the party,’ he says.

She nods and closes the door.

Isaac steps away from the car as she starts the engine, puts it into gear and steers into the darkness. She drives home slowly, taking every corner with care, thinking of Isaac curled up in the grandstand, thinking of being beside

him, holding his hand.

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19

BICYCLES

Isaac wakes with sunshine, and pictures Sophie sleeping somewhere not so far away. He imagines her bedroom full of clothes and boots and schoolbooks. After she left last night, he lay back in the wooden stall and took ages to fall asleep, his mind replaying holding Sophie's hand, hearing her voice, thinking of the way she listened to him and tried to understand.

In the distance, kangaroos feed on the far side of the racetrack. Two joeys hop close to their mother. Isaac can see the father watching him. A semitrailer rumbles along the road and the roos bounce to safety in the opposite paddock.

Isaac removes his jeans and t-shirt and walks down from the grandstand, dressed only in boxer shorts. He goes to the rear of the stand and turns on the tap, cupping his hands under the bracing flow and washing his face and torso, scrubbing roughly through his hair. He looks at the expanse of dry grass paddocks and the distant gum trees on the hills before washing the rest of his body. He smiles to himself. An outdoor bathroom. He walks back to the middle rung where his clean clothes wait in the backpack. The sun dries his skin before he dresses.

The walk into town takes twenty minutes now he's found a track through the paddocks. He avoids the main road and the prying eyes of passing motorists.

Main Street echoes with Sunday-morning emptiness. Isaac takes the keys to Joan's Cafe from his pocket and unlocks the door. He switches on the lights and raises the blinds on the front windows. The espresso machine needs fifteen minutes after the power is switched on to build enough pressure. He'd like a coffee right now. He unlocks the back door. In the

shade on the step is a milk crate full of bottles, delivered earlier. Isaac carries it to the fridge and stacks the shelves, before removing the carrot and hummingbird cakes and placing them both in the display on the counter.

He puts two slices of raisin bread in the toaster and wipes the counter and coffee machine, even though both are spotlessly clean. Joan didn't want to open the cafe so early on Sunday but Isaac convinced her. He promised he'd work all day and she wouldn't have to come in at all. He's proud she trusts him so much.

Isaac butters the toast, puts it on a plate and carries it outside to the footpath. He can't wait until they have outdoor tables. He sits on the bench seat next door and looks down Main Street. A few cars are parked at one end, probably left overnight by drunks from the Courthouse Hotel. He looks across the road. Grind Cafe is shut. He's got two hours of being the only place open in town. Not much good if there's no-one around.

He's about to walk back inside when he hears a whirring sound. A group of cyclists barrel down the street. Twenty of them ride two abreast. They whirl past in a flash of lurid green and yellow lycra. One cyclist waves at Isaac and calls something to his mates as they whiz past. Isaac doesn't recognise him in sunglasses and a helmet, but watches them circle the roundabout and return to where he sits. They slow to a wobbly bunch.

'G'day,' the man calls.

Isaac nods. It's Gerry, Mr Espresso with mineral water.

'Are you open?' Gerry asks, removing his helmet.

'Absolutely,' Isaac says. Twenty coffees! Joan will be impressed.

'What do you reckon, fellas?' Gerry calls.

A few cyclists hop off their bikes in answer. Isaac walks back into the cafe, making sure to leave the front door open. He counts the number of tables and chairs. Just enough. The men follow him inside. They walk with an ungainly stride because of their shoes. It's like a tribe of tap dancers invading the cafe.

Isaac stands at the counter, pen and notepad ready. The men reel off orders. A few spy the cakes and can't resist. Isaac starts on the coffee. The machine has two groupheads, so he can pour four coffees at once. He begins with orders that require milk. He heats two jugs of milk to the correct temperature, letting them settle as he places the cups on plates. He hunts around under the counter for a large tray, before pouring the milk into each coffee, forcing himself to slow down. A good coffee will have these blokes back next week. He's proud of the first eight coffees – strong crema, the milk just the right consistency when it pours. He carries the tray to the tables but has no idea who ordered what.

‘Six lattes and two flat whites so far,’ he calls.

The men obediently raise their hands and take the coffees from the tray. Isaac rushes back to the machine and begins the process all over again. Gerry comes to the counter.

‘Isaac, would you be offended if I offered to help?’ Gerry whispers. ‘I can get the cakes, if that's okay?’

‘If ... if you want,’ Isaac says, reaching under the counter for the cake plates and showing Gerry where the knives and forks are kept.

Gerry races around the counter. ‘I've always wanted to work in a cafe,’ he says.

‘You're kidding?’

‘Nah,’ Gerry says. ‘I'd love to be able to operate that machine.’

‘I'll teach you sometime,’ Isaac offers. No harm in pleasing his best customer.

He watches Gerry place six slices of cake on the plates, put them on the tray and walk around the counter to be met with whoops of laughter from his cycling buddies.

‘Is serving in lycra acceptable health regulations?’ someone asks.

‘Get stuffed,’ Gerry says. ‘I work for council. So from now on it is!’

Everyone cheers. By the time Gerry has served the cakes, Isaac's finished another two batches of flat whites. Just four espressos remaining.

A few minutes later, Isaac brings the last of the espressos to Gerry and the cyclists sitting near him before racing back to the counter to get four glasses and a bottle of mineral water. He carries it to the table.

‘I told you this place was the real deal,’ Gerry calls.

‘Good coffee, son,’ says a bald man wearing a jersey with the words *Someone’s Father* emblazoned across the back.

Isaac stands behind the counter, cleaning the steam wand on the machine and rinsing the portafilters, his heart rate calming. He looks outside. Bicycles are leaning on the pot plants lining the footpath and against the cafe window.

The men don’t stay long. Most of them return the plates and cups to the counter before clanking out the door. They all pay with credit cards. Gerry is the last to leave.

‘Great coffee, Isaac,’ he says. ‘We’ve been waiting for a cafe to open early enough to suit us.’

‘I’ll be here next Sunday,’ Isaac says.

‘Is Wednesday okay, for a lesson?’

‘Sure,’ Isaac says. ‘I’m only here in the morning though.’

Gerry nods and waves.

When everyone has gone, Isaac fills the sink with hot water and washes all the plates and cups. A tear runs down his cheek, which he refuses to wipe away. He squints his eyes shut, keeps his hands in the hot, soapy water and gives thanks for Gerry and the cyclists. He doesn’t understand why, but he’s sure their arrival this morning is an omen, a confirmation of his decision to stay in town. He can’t wait to see Joan’s face when he tells her about all their new customers.

After finishing the dishes and stacking them back on the shelf, he wipes the tables and fetches a mop and bucket from the kitchen. He starts at the front and methodically mops the cafe. By the time he’s finished, the cafe opposite has opened. He walks to the counter and calculates how much Joan has made from this morning. If he keeps smiling like this, he’ll scare away

the customers.

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PANCAKES

The sunlight streams through Sophie's garden window. She sits up in bed and looks around her room. Linocuts hang on the walls, clothes are scattered on the polished floorboards and stacked in the open cupboard, her desk is cluttered with drawings of her next lino print, her dresser has moisturiser and perfume bottles in rows, and a full-length mirror leans against the wall that's painted in her choice of colour – gentle lemon. Her dad crossed out the word *gentle* on the paint tin.

She thinks of Isaac waking on the hard bench seat next to his backpack. Sophie's house has a shower of slate and stone, with endless hot water, while Isaac washes himself under a cold tap. Sophie sighs.

A knock at the door.

'Come in,' she calls.

Her mum enters her room, stepping over the clothes on the floor before sitting on the edge of Sophie's bed.

'Did you have a good night?' she asks.

'Got stoned, had sex with two farmer's sons and crashed the car in a ditch,' Sophie says. 'Apart from that, it was dull.'

'Oh, Sophie,' her mum says.

'It was okay, Mum.' Sophie hops out of bed and reaches for her jeans on the floor. She puts one leg in and stops. 'Actually, Butler was a real prick.' She puts the other leg in and pulls the jeans up, struggling to stand at the same time, then falls back on her bed.

'Are you still drunk?'

'Two Cokes, Mum,' Sophie says. 'I'm just a clumsy dresser.'

'I'm eating all the pancakes, Sophie,' her dad calls from the kitchen.

Dana stands and walks into the hallway, leaving Sophie's door open.

Sophie shrugs into a loose-fitting top and walks out of her bedroom. She shuffles to the kitchen table and sits down. A glass of freshly squeezed orange juice is beside her empty plate. In the centre of the table is a stack of buckwheat pancakes beside a pitcher of maple syrup. Sophie reaches for the pot of coffee.

'I'm not giving you a review of last night, Dad,' she says. The pancakes smell delicious.

'I heard you had sex with multiple partners,' her dad jokes. 'I've warned you about that. They'll only get jealous.'

Sophie reaches for three pancakes. She notices her mum raise an eyebrow.

'All that sex takes a lot of energy,' she says.

'That's why you should use drugs!' her dad says.

He's wearing lycra and a cycling jersey. Sophie checks the clock on the wall. He's probably cycled thirty kilometres while she's been sleeping. What is it with old people and waking up early?

Sophie eats slowly, taking alternate sips of juice and coffee between mouthfuls of pancake. All that sugar and caffeine can only help.

'You said Butler was a prick,' her mum reminds her.

Sophie chews a thick slice of pancake and swallows. The problem with having supportive parents is they want to help.

'He didn't like me bringing a friend,' Sophie says.

'Your dad told me you have a boyfriend.'

'I didn't say that exactly,' Gerry interrupts.

'Butler asked my friend to leave,' Sophie says.

'I hope you told him to fuck off,' her dad says. 'Maybe in nicer language?'

'Actually,' Sophie smiles, 'I did use very similar words.'

'What happened then?' Dana asks.

'We went back to his place,' Sophie says.

Her mum averts her eyes. Her dad busies himself pouring another glass of

juice.

‘And talked,’ Sophie adds.

‘Where does he live?’ her mum asks.

‘The other side of town,’ she says, and sips her coffee. She wished Isaac had told her why he left home. Was his dad violent? Or worse? What can be worse? ‘And before you ask, he doesn’t go to school. He works. He’s seventeen years old and I don’t know if I’ll see him again. But I think I want to. Okay?’

Dana holds up her hands in surrender.

‘Your mum and I got drunk and sat in the garden,’ Gerry says. Sophie can always rely on her dad to change the subject.

‘Rubbish. I barely finished the bottle,’ Dana protests. She collects the plates from the table and walks to the sink.

Sophie’s dad winks. ‘I got drunk and my beautiful wife watched me,’ he says.

‘Like she has for thirty years,’ Dana adds.

‘And yet it’s still entertaining,’ Gerry says.

Sophie’s mum picks up a tea towel and flicks it at her husband. ‘Do us all a favour and get out of that stupid lycra,’ she says.

‘You’re just jealous you don’t have a body like this,’ he says.

Dana flicks him again as he walks to the bathroom.

‘I married a child,’ she says.

Sophie smiles. Is it okay for your parents to be your best friends?

21

PINE

Sophie walks into her back garden, following the concrete path past the clothesline, past her mum's veggie patch of tomatoes and broccoli, to the wooden cubbyhouse near the back fence. She climbs the ladder and wriggles into the small room, breathing in pine and dust. The floorboards are cool and damp underneath her and spiderwebs hang from the roof beams. She sits on the one remaining child's chair, staring across the neighbour's back fence to an immaculate green lawn. Mr Gould loves his garden.

Sophie remembers building the cubby with her dad. She was ten years old and they spent all weekend sawing logs and drilling holes. Her job was to hold the spirit level against the logs to make sure they were straight while her dad braced them and poured the concrete into the post holes. Sophie hammered the nails into every floorboard. Once it was complete, she'd set herself up in the cubby with a sleeping bag and pillow and refused to come inside.

When she woke in her own bed the next morning, she scrambled to the window, afraid she'd dreamt it all. Had the cubby disappeared? It stood as sturdy and welcoming as she remembered. Her dad must have carried her inside after she'd fallen asleep.

This morning she runs her hands across the pine walls and looks back towards her house. Her bedroom window is open, the curtain pulled back and tied by an orange cord. On her desk are the workings of her latest linocut, the pfeil resting in its holder, pencils and pens scattered around the lino.

She takes out her phone and stares at Isaac's number, considers sending

him a selfie from the cubbyhouse. Would he answer?

Only one way to find out.

She holds the phone at arm's length and clicks once, swipes to gallery and checks the result. Her hair is too short, but so what. She types a message.

Me in my cubbyhouse. Where I slept when I was ten years old.

She presses send and closes her eyes.

Isaac.

Butler.

What led one boy to be soft and gentle, the other to be a floppy egotist?

A week after laughing at Butler's offer to go swimming at the river, she'd found a scrawl of paper twisted into her locker door. It was a picture of an obese old lady on a mobility scooter with Sophie's school portrait transposed over her head. The words *Spinster Sophie* were scrawled across the scooter. She stared at it for longer than the artwork deserved. Really? Sophie felt embarrassed looking at the image. She didn't care what Butler thought of her, only that he was willing to show it in such a shitty way. As she walked from the locker, she heard laughter.

Butler stood at the end of the corridor, leaning against a wall. His pants were too low, his school shirt partially unbuttoned and loose around the gravity-defying pants, and his boots were sheep-paddock dusty. Sophie thought he had all the appeal of gangrene.

She turned and walked to where he stood, a wide grin on his face, that insufferable hair flopping over his eye. She held the paper up to his face. But the words wouldn't come. To say anything was to stoop to his infantile level. Instead, she ripped the paper into tiny pieces and let them flutter to the floor.

Butler kept smirking, as if confident his barb had found its mark. Sophie tried to stop the blood rising to her face, but the childishness of it all was too much.

Blush time.

‘It’s just a joke,’ he said, flicking his hair away from his eyes.

In what universe was such an image funny? Sophie wondered.

She walked away and somewhere near the end of the corridor found the words she’d wanted to say. She turned on her heel, determined to shout at the top of her voice, only to find a vacant corridor.

That incident triggered a burst of name-calling in the following weeks. Sophie was astonished that words like ‘frigid’ and ‘teaser’ ever entered the mind of a young man. Correction. An immature young boy.

After the first few insults, Sophie began to laugh at every barb. What else could she do? Join in a slanging match? It was all so ... juvenile. This only spurred Butler into enlisting his mate, Lachlan. She now had to endure double the dickhead insults.

Eventually Butler took up with Sienna and lost interest in Sophie. She was never so happy to be ignored. One day she bumped into Lachlan in the school corridor. They sprang away from each other as if magnetic opposites. Lachlan looked everywhere at once, while Sophie held her schoolbooks close to her chest. Sophie was late for Maths, but wasn’t moving out of his way, no matter what. Lachlan shuffled his feet and scratched a hand through messy hair. He looked like he wanted to say something. Sophie braced for the next insult, determined to laugh in response.

‘I’m ... I’m sorry,’ Lachlan said.

It took a few moments for Sophie to register what he was saying.

‘So you should be!’ she said.

‘I ... I am really really...’ Lachlan stammered, unable to find another word for sorry.

‘Why did you say those things?’ Sophie asked, hoping Lachlan would offer some reason for the past few weeks.

Lachlan blushed. ‘I ... I dunno,’ he muttered, before pushing past her and hurrying down the corridor.

Sophie retreated to Maths, which was nowhere near as difficult to

understand as the opposite sex.

Sophie's phone dings with a text, bringing her back to a house spider climbing up the wall of the cubbyhouse while Mr Gould starts his lawnmower.

She swipes the screen.

Isaac.

You slept rough much earlier than me.

Below the text is a photo of Isaac at the coffee machine, holding an espresso out to the camera.

Sophie takes that as an invitation. Next week she will visit Joan's.

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22

DUST

On Monday morning, Isaac wakes with dust on his skin and the churning sound of machinery. He peers over the seat. A red tractor pulling a grass-cutting machine circles the racetrack, driven by a man wearing overalls and a wide-brimmed hat with a handkerchief tied around his mouth and nose. The machine kicks up more dust than grass. A murder of crows follow in the tractor's wake, feasting on worms. Isaac checks his watch, cursing to himself.

The tractor putters down the straight, the slowest horse in the field. Isaac's tempted to make a run for it when it's on the far side but can't risk being seen. He packs his bag, slips on his boots, then lies flat on the bench seat, settling in for the wait.

Eventually, the tractor pulls up near the canteen. The man switches off the engine and hops down, carrying a mallet. He walks with a limp to the front of the tractor, bends down and fiddles with something underneath the machine. After a minute of bashing, he scratches his bum and returns to the tractor seat, removing his hat and handkerchief and wiping his face before rolling a cigarette. He lights it and takes a long drag. The wind blows smoke across the track. The man puts his feet up on the tractor dash and wriggles in his seat, staring into the distance.

Isaac wonders what the man is thinking about.

After work, Isaac's father would lounge on the back step at home with a can of beer and a cigarette. He'd take off his boots, hang his socks on the Hills hoist and drink until dinner, the bottles lining the bottom step. Isaac stayed in the kitchen cooking. His father expected to eat at six every night. The

meal was always ready ten minutes before, but Isaac kept it in the oven, desperate never to be late. He'd watch his father from the kitchen window. A sip of beer. A smoke. A shake of the head. Bruised clouds, a hustling wind, tension in the air. Anger building like a storm.

On those days, Isaac would eat early while standing at the window. Then he'd wash the plate and cutlery and tell his father he wasn't hungry to avoid sitting at the table with him. Being within arm's reach was dangerous. His father would eat in silence while Isaac sat on the back step, thinking of the irony of them taking turns staring at the backyard every evening. As if the answers were in a patch of grass, a squeaking clothesline and a ramshackle shed.

The day he left home, Isaac resolved to keep negative thoughts to himself but to let the positive play out in life. Every time he did something helpful, something kind, he'd taken another step away from his father. A leap away from wounded silence. The further, the better. Unlike anger and violence, kindness repaid itself. Isaac's reward was friendship with Joan. With Sophie.

The tractor starts again. Isaac checks his watch. He's definitely late. He stretches out on the seat and stares at the metal girders spanning the grandstand ceiling. Spiderwebs drift between the beams. He closes his eyes and thinks of Sophie. Every part of his body relaxes. He wonders if she'll come back to the cafe today. Or later this week.

Isaac hears a banging sound and pokes his head above the seat. The tractor is loaded on the back of a truck. The man tosses his hat into the cabin before climbing up and starting the truck.

As the vehicle makes its way towards the main road, Isaac runs down from the grandstand, two steps at a time. He washes his face under the tap and runs across the paddock towards town. Sweat trickles down his neck. His shirt is damp and musty but he doesn't stop running until Main Street. When he sees people, he slows to a brisk walk. A running teenager draws attention; people notice and remember. Isaac wants to blend in.

He reaches into his pocket for the keys to Joan's Cafe but the door is already open. Cursing, he steps into the cool of the cafe. Joan is behind the espresso machine serving a customer. She nods as he walks to the kitchen, leaving his bag in the corner. Isaac tries to slow his breathing, ripping a paper towel from the roll on the bench and wiping the sweat from his face. He hears the front door close and walks behind the counter.

'You look a mess,' Joan says. She's wearing an apron decorated with native birds. Her earrings are dangling plastic parrots to match.

'I'm really sorry, Joan,' Isaac says. He tries to gauge her reaction but she busies herself cleaning the machine.

'Brodie had a sniffle this morning. I was going to stay home, but ...'

'You can go now if you want,' Isaac suggests. 'I'll stay for the day to make up for this morning.'

Joan wipes the steam wand on the coffee machine. 'I don't pay enough,' she says. 'How can I expect you to stay?'

'I want to,' Isaac says. He'd like to tell her he has nothing else to do, nowhere to go. The cafe is his refuge.

'I don't know if this is working out, son,' Joan says.

'Why? Because I was a few hours late?' Isaac tries to keep the fear from his voice.

'I don't like not paying you properly,' Joan says. 'And I know nothing about you.' She tosses the cloth in the sink. 'I don't even know your last name.'

'It's Miller,' Isaac says. 'I'm seventeen years old. My mum left home when I was twelve and my dad ...' Isaac swallows. He's said enough. He looks out to the footpath, wishing for a customer.

Joan turns on the tap and rinses the cloth in the sink, then wrings it out and hangs it over the tap.

'Did you print out the takings from yesterday?' Isaac asks.

'Not yet.'

'Please?' Isaac points to the cash register.

Joan sighs and types into the register. It tallies out a long sheet of paper, much longer than usual. Joan reads the amount.

‘What did you do? Host a birthday party?’ She smiles.

‘We had twenty bike riders in early because we were the only place open,’ Isaac says, trying to form an argument in his head. ‘They might come back next week,’ he adds.

‘It still doesn’t make it right,’ Joan says. ‘I simply can’t afford to pay you the wages. I’m sorry.’

‘But you already pay me half of the takings,’ Isaac says.

Joan scoffs. ‘Half of this morning is eight dollars, fifty cents,’ she says.

‘I wasn’t here this morning,’ Isaac says.

Joan looks at him and laughs.

‘How much was yesterday?’ Isaac asks. A few truck drivers came in for lunch and there were takeaway coffees in the afternoon.

‘A little over six hundred dollars,’ she says.

‘Six o’clock till four is ...’ Isaac tries to calculate the hours.

‘Ten hours,’ Joan says.

‘So, whatever is half after costs will be better than okay, right?’ Isaac says.

Joan nods.

‘And you’re usually not open until late on Sunday, so the rest is a bonus,’ Isaac adds, his voice getting more confident.

‘You sound like a salesman,’ Joan says.

‘I thought I’d done something ...’ Isaac wants to say ‘worthwhile’ but the word won’t come, it’s knotted in his stomach.

Joan steps towards Isaac and wraps her arms around him.

Isaac hesitates before accepting the hug. For a moment, he feels like a boy again. Joan smells of shampoo and milk. He tries to remember what his mum smelt of but all that comes is the stale aroma of cabbage masked by soap.

Joan steps back and ruffles his hair.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘You win. But we need to make it legal. I’ll bring in the forms tomorrow.’

‘I’ll sign them,’ Isaac smiles, ‘as long as I don’t have to wear your aprons.’

‘You criticise my aprons,’ Joan wags her finger, ‘and there’ll be hell to pay.’

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23

SCHOOL

Sophie walks through the school gates, keeping her head down all the way to English. She's timed her arrival to coincide with first period.

In the classroom, she sits in her usual seat beside the window, strapping her backpack over the chair and taking out her workbook. Sienna waltzes in and, to Sophie's surprise, appears to nod hello. Sophie forces a smile in response. As the rest of her classmates arrive, Sophie stares out the window to the sports oval. From the corner of her eye, she sees Butler enter the room. Some of the boys cheer and make stupid comments about his party. Butler high-fives them and shuffles to his place a few chairs in front of Sophie. He turns to stare at her. Despite herself, she feels her knees shaking.

'You should have stayed, Sophie,' Butler says, so all the class can hear, 'instead of running away.'

'I had better things to do,' Sophie says.

Sienna laughs and Butler turns towards her, gestures rudely with his hand and is about to say something when Ms Sims enters.

The teacher apologises for being late, dumps an oversized bag on her chair and shuffles around inside for a book.

'What better way to start a double period on Monday morning,' she announces before holding up a book with a serious blue cover, 'than with an exploration of social media.'

A few boys groan.

'Can we start with Instagram models, Ms?' Lachlan calls.

'From Facebook to TikTok in ten chapters,' Ms Sims says, ignoring Lachlan and brandishing the book.

Sophie looks around the classroom. Every girl is focused on Ms Sims.

Even some of the boys seem vaguely interested. Butler slouches in his chair and alternates between staring out the window and running his hand through his hair.

After ten minutes of Ms Sims talking, Butler raises his hand, interrupting a monologue on movements that circle from Greta Thunberg to #MeToo and back again. Sophie has been transfixed. She wonders if this lesson is part of the curriculum or if Ms Sims has decided to focus on current events rather than Shakespeare.

‘Yes, Butler?’ Ms Sims looks wary.

‘Sexting, Ms,’ Butler says. ‘You’ve forgotten sexting.’

A few boys laugh.

‘It’s illegal to send images of someone under eighteen,’ Ms Sims says. ‘No matter where they come from.’

‘What’s wrong with a photo or two?’ Butler smirks.

‘People can get hurt ...’ Ms Sims hesitates. ‘These images can stay online forever.’

Sophie feels sick. Trust Butler to bring up the worst of social media.

‘But what if it’s among friends?’ Butler grins.

‘A bunch of losers swapping photos,’ Sienna interjects.

The class turn as one to stare at Sienna, the silence crushing.

Ms Sims looks from Sienna to Butler, before continuing, ‘It isn’t a laughing matter, Butler. There’s a big difference between recording and publishing. Much like there’s a big difference between calling someone a farmer or a redneck.’

‘His dad’s both, Ms,’ Lachlan laughs.

Butler turns quickly in his seat, his face red. Lachlan stops laughing and holds up both hands in defence.

‘I suspect that means Lachlan is sorry,’ Ms Sims says. ‘But it proves my point in a clumsy way.’ She looks from Lachlan to Butler. ‘Now can we get back to social media and the changes it’s made to our lives?’ Ms Sims asks.

Butler shrugs and Ms Sims moves on to a discussion of the rise of social

media campaigns aimed at Hollywood actors accused of sexual abuse.

The bell rings and Butler hurries to the door. He's followed by all his mates except Lachlan, who takes longer than usual to pack his bag. Sophie breathes a sigh of relief. She keeps her head down and walks to her usual spot in the shade of a melaleuca tree near the library. She removes a thermos of coffee from her backpack and pours a cup.

A shadow looms over her seat.

'Are you smuggling booze into school?' the voice says.

Sienna Baxter stands in front of her. Sophie looks down at the cup. Has Butler sent Sienna to taunt her about Saturday night? But Sienna stood up against the boys in class just then. Sophie offers Sienna the cup, as a gesture of truce.

Sienna sits beside her.

'It makes me hyper,' Sienna says. 'The last thing I need in Maths next period.'

'It'll keep you awake,' Sophie suggests.

'I'm practising the art of sleeping with my eyes open,' Sienna says. 'How Zen is that?'

Sophie laughs. She notices Sienna has black painted fingernails even though it's against school policy. And her skirt is hitched up to the limit. The last time Sienna spoke to Sophie at school was when they were fourteen. Sophie was at the front of the canteen line and Sienna pretended to be friendly so she could push in. As soon as she'd bought her food, Sienna waved and walked away. Rebecca ignored Sienna, Jessica and Isabella. 'On principle,' she'd say, although Sophie could never understand what principle that was.

'Butler is a prick,' Sienna whispers.

Sophie's not sure she's heard correctly. Butler and Sienna were together only a few weeks ago. They'd held court in the seniors room, the alpha couple who looked down on everyone. Sophie preferred the outdoors. Despite herself, she'd been pleased – Butler's pack left her alone.

‘I nearly choked on my beer when you stood up to him at the party,’ Sienna says. She leans closer. ‘But I was scared.’

‘Butler was picking on my friend,’ Sophie says. She doesn’t mention Isaac’s name, still suspicious of why Sienna is sitting beside her at recess.

‘After you left,’ Sienna says, ‘the girls all called you a loser.’

‘That’s hardly surprising.’ Sophie looks across to the boys playing basketball.

‘You don’t trust me, do you?’ Sienna asks.

‘Why should I?’ Sophie answers. ‘I don’t know you. Not really.’

‘Fair enough.’ Sienna curls a leg under her body and leans back on the seat.

Sophie can’t understand why Sienna is talking to her. They watch an ibis land on the rubbish bin near the basketball court, pecking among the wrappers and empty bottles. A half-eaten pie falls to the ground and the bird swoops.

‘I’m pleased you spoke out in class today,’ Sophie says.

Sienna’s face clouds over and she shifts on the seat. ‘Something tells me you know what Butler’s like?’ she asks.

Sophie nods.

‘When Butler and I were together,’ Sienna says, ‘he started pressuring me for ... you know.’

Sienna looks behind them. She moves closer to Sophie on the seat.

‘His ute had a mattress and blanket in the back and we’d park near the swimming hole.’ Sienna’s voice is quiet. She glances at Sophie. ‘It should have been romantic, right?’

Sophie nods.

‘Every girl’s dream,’ Sienna says. ‘To hell with that.’

Sophie grips her coffee cup tighter.

‘At the start, I actually thought about doing it with him,’ she says. ‘But something, some sixth sense warned me.’ She sighs. ‘Why do boys like him act so ... so entitled?’

‘He’s the mayor’s son,’ Sophie offers.

‘So what? Doesn’t mean he owns my body.’ Sienna’s voice wavers.

They’re both silent. Sienna leans across and takes the coffee cup from Sophie. She has a sip.

‘I won’t be able to sleep in Maths anyway,’ Sienna says. ‘Not now.’

Sophie refills the cup from the thermos.

Sienna shivers. ‘The thought of him touching me makes me want to puke.’ She wipes her eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sophie says. She wants to tell Sienna about laughing at Butler, and his childish response, but still doesn’t trust herself. Or Sienna.

‘He acted like he was being such a gentleman driving me home when I wouldn’t give him what he wanted. What a jerk.’ Sienna grimaces.

Sophie reaches across and touches Sienna’s shoulder.

‘When he stopped outside my house,’ Sienna says, ‘my dad came out and chatted to him about the football while I sat in the car, my skin crawling. It was more than I could stand. I got out and ran upstairs. When Dad came in he wanted to know how I could be so rude.’

Sienna glances at Sophie. ‘The following Monday at school,’ she says, ‘Butler touched my bum.’ Sienna’s face is red with suppressed anger. ‘I wanted to punch him.’

‘What ... what did you do?’ Sophie asks.

‘I jumped up and told him to stop,’ Sienna says. ‘He laughed it off.’

‘I thought you two were together,’ Sophie says.

‘I’ve spent the past few weeks making up excuses to avoid being alone with him,’ Sienna says. ‘Do you know how hard that’s been? My friends keep asking me about Butler and his swimming pool and car and fancy house as if he’s the ultimate prize.’

Sienna takes the cup and has another sip.

‘Eventually, he got the message,’ Sienna says. ‘He calls me “frigid” now.’ She shakes her head. ‘Can you believe people still use that word?’

‘He ... he called me that too,’ Sophie admits. ‘When I laughed at him for

asking me out.'

'That's what I should have done!' Sienna says.

Sophie remembers Sienna in Grind last week with her friends. As if she ruled the world, the boys hanging on every word she said.

'I never suspected,' Sophie says.

'I've learnt to hide my feelings,' Sienna says. 'The rest is just a front. I'm putting on a show. Fooling everyone but myself.'

Sophie looks at Sienna's perfect skin, wide cheekbones and teeth that should have their own toothpaste commercial, and for once sees something more, something better. If it's this difficult for Sienna to be appreciated, it must be impossible for everyone else. All the while Butler and his gang strut across the schoolyard impervious to the damage they cause.

'So why did you go to the party?' Sophie asks.

'Because I want to keep the friends I have.' Sienna scoffs. 'Did you notice how few boys there were?'

Sophie nods. That's what Isaac said.

Then she remembers how Isaac has listened to everything she said and never boasted about anything in his past. She feels a trickle of sweat tingle down her back. He listened. As simple as that.

'Do you think our town is ready for its own version of #MeToo?' Sienna asks.

'Maybe that's what Ms Sims was suggesting,' Sophie says.

'The only problem,' Sienna says, 'is that if I piss off Butler, I lose all my friends.'

The bell rings. Sophie understands just how Sienna feels.

Sienna offers Sophie the empty cup. 'I'm not sure I have that much guts,' she says.

CANDLES

In the late afternoon, Isaac takes an alternate route to the racetrack. He passes a wooden church set back from the road, its front garden a patchwork of flat rocks and succulents flowering pink and blue. The garden looks as well maintained as the church.

He steps through the gate and walks up the few steps to the front door, pushing it open with a creak. Inside, the church is cool and dark. Rows of wooden pews stretch to a simple altar and a lectern cradling the Bible. Behind the altar is a sculpture of Jesus in death.

To the left of the altar is a large metal candle holder with white candles stuck into the prongs. Isaac wonders how many people come in to burn a candle and pray for someone they've lost. He thinks of his mum. It's getting harder to remember her as the years pass.

A week after she left, his father took everything that reminded him of her and dumped it in the backyard. Clothes, photos, birthday cards she'd kept, a beach hat and a pair of running shoes she'd used for gardening were piled up and doused in petrol. Isaac watched from the kitchen window. His father drank a few beers on the back step before standing over the pile and lighting a match. He laughed as the flames roared.

Isaac gripped the sink and tried to not cry. Tried to tell himself it was just clothes, just ... stuff. It didn't mean anything. He remembered what she looked like, the sound of her voice, the touch of her arms around him that last morning. His father couldn't burn that.

Isaac scoffs. His father built a fire to forget, while in this church people burn a candle to remember. He wonders where his mother is now. If she thinks of him. How does she resolve the escape from her husband with

abandoning her son? How can anyone make a choice like that?

Apart from those few weeks before leaving, she hadn't shown Isaac much affection. She'd kiss him on his birthday and at Christmas, but was otherwise distant. When she'd taken him to the swimming pool during the holidays before she left, he'd been excited to discover a new person living in his house. He'd spent more time in the kitchen, helping wash the dishes, learning how to cook. Maybe that was her plan all along? To teach him just enough to survive her leaving. To sentence him to years of housework looking after his father.

Was she thinking of her husband's welfare, not his, as she planned her escape? Was he the sacrifice, so that she may live?

He remembers being awake in bed and listening to the noises from his parents' bedroom. He was old enough to know what they were doing.

Isaac would stuff a pillow over his ears to block out the sound. Sometimes he'd crawl out the window and sit on the front step, watching the wind bristle the leaves of the trees. A plane would fly overhead, its wingtip lights twinkling.

Isaac walks to the candle holder. A bunch of long white candles sit in an open box. Next to the box is a money jar and a sign advising two dollars. He has money now – thanks to Joan. He can waste it on a burning candle. A candle that flickers away to nothing if he waits long enough. Should he burn a candle in forgiveness? Or in forgetting?

He closes his eyes and tries to remember his mum. She had short brown hair, crooked teeth like Isaac, and there were always dark rings under her eyes. She looked down rather than out at the world. That's all he could remember. He would tower over her now. His arms would reach around her waist with ease.

People burn a candle to remember. To recall happier times, helping them through difficult times. It's like pulling into the service station to fill up your car. In this small chapel, people refill their memories with the scent of a candle, the flickering light and Jesus on a cross.

Isaac turns away. The floorboards creak as he walks to the door. He wonders why he came here. This place offers nothing but the past. Isaac prefers his future.

He smiles. A few weeks ago he was lost. Now he thinks of Sophie. Of Joan. Of the customers he chats with because it is never busy enough to move people along. He likes where he is. He doesn't need his mother. He's left his father for good.

Candles are for people worth remembering.

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WINE

Sophie sets the dinner table with plates, cutlery, a wine glass for her mum, a schooner for her dad and a tumbler filled with ice and mineral water for herself. In the centre of the table is a glass vase filled with lavender and rosemary from the garden. Above the table hang metal lanterns, each with a candle. They're lit at Christmas and New Year's Eve or whenever a storm blows the town's power supply. Sometimes her dad forgets and bumps his head on them when getting up too quickly. He swears and Sophie's mum reminds him who put them there.

Sophie's father carries an oval-shaped serving tray to the table and sets it on the breadboard. Dana pours herself a riesling and opens the beer for Gerry. Before sitting down, Gerry turns off the kitchen light and pulls up the window blinds. The moonlight washes across the kitchen.

'Pea and ham risotto,' he says. 'Anyone who adds cheese to this masterpiece has to do the dishes.'

He sits opposite Sophie and serves her first, then his wife, before loading his plate. He takes a hearty slug of beer then tucks into the meal.

'How is the world of giftware?' he asks Dana, his mouth half-full of food.

'If it's tartan or made in France, they'll pay triple what it's worth,' she says.

'Who invented giftware anyway?' Gerry asks. 'I reckon when we visit someone we should take a live chicken. Or a rockmelon. Or a jar of honey. Something useful.'

'Why not a hammer? Or a tin of paint?' Dana adds, rolling her eyes at Sophie.

'Absolutely,' Gerry agrees. 'Hardware is the perfect gift. Better than a

tartan-wrapped toilet roll. Or French lace.'

'You are such a turnip,' Dana says.

'Thank you, my darling,' Gerry replies. He looks at Sophie. 'And how was your day, oh cherished one?'

Sophie thinks of lunchtime with Sienna and how she couldn't focus on schoolwork for the rest of the day. To cleanse herself of all things Butler, she texted Isaac at the end of school and suggested she bring him leftovers from her dad's Monday-night risotto later this evening. He texted back a photo of cutlery and a paper napkin, snapped at Joan's Cafe. Sophie assumed that meant yes.

Gerry clears his throat and Sophie realises both her parents are looking at her with concerned expressions.

'Sorry,' she stammers. 'I ... I was actually hoping to borrow the car after dinner.'

Her mum takes another sip of wine and arches an eyebrow at her husband. He shrugs.

'Well, seeing as your dad refuses to ask what you're planning,' Dana says, 'it's up to me. Like always.'

'I'm planning on feeding the less fortunate,' she says. 'If we have any leftovers.'

'There's always leftovers,' Gerry says.

Dana glares at Gerry before checking her watch. 'It's seven-thirty,' she says. 'Don't you have to finish your linocut?'

'I did all my homework this afternoon, Mum,' Sophie says.

'I'd like to know where you're going.'

'To my friend's place,' Sophie says. 'His ... his stove is broken.'

Dana makes a sound at the back of her throat and stares across the table at her husband. Gerry wriggles in his seat.

'I'll be home by ten-thirty,' Sophie says. 'I promise we won't have sex until he's eaten all of Dad's risotto.'

Gerry laughs. 'At least you've got your priorities right.' He looks at Dana.

She's not smiling.

'Perfect,' Sophie says. 'Risotto. Sex. Home by ten-thirty, tucked up in bed.'

Dana sighs. Sophie walks around the table and hugs her mum. For the rest of dinner, Sophie talks about Ms Sims's discussion on social media. Her parents listen, approvingly. When she finishes her dinner, Sophie takes her plate to the sink.

She fetches a Tupperware container and loads it with risotto before squeezing the lid closed. More than enough for Isaac.

'If there's an ambulance outside when you get home,' Dana says, 'don't worry. I've just stabbed your dad in the head with a fork.'

Sophie packs the container in a brown paper bag, walks to the hook near the front door and lifts off the car key.

'Drive carefully,' Gerry says. 'Airbags aren't as reliable as condoms.'

As Sophie walks out the door, she sees her mum throwing a napkin across the table at her dad.

Sophie hops in the car and is grateful for the millionth time that her parents are so relaxed about stuff. So relaxed, they haven't even asked Isaac's name. Maybe next time Isaac can eat at her place. Could he cope with the dad jokes?

She starts the car and steers out of the driveway. The streets are quiet, everyone indoors eating dinner or watching television. Monday night in her town, centre of the universe. She stops at a traffic light and watches a semitrailer lumber across the intersection. It's loaded with sheep. She can't help but think of Butler, surrounded by thousands of sheep on his parents' farm. Sometimes the world is a mirror. She checks the clock on the dash.

Two boys on skateboards rumble down Main Street. Sophie is content to follow behind. She recognises them as the Kent twins from Year Nine. Johnny Kent has a fake tattoo on his right bicep and his brother, Jake, is wearing a beanie, despite the weather. They live in a mudbrick house outside of town with their aunt and uncle after moving here from

Melbourne last year. Rumour is their parents are both in jail. They skateboard, hang out at the park, and until Isaac arrived in town, Sophie thought they were the only interesting boys around. But they were Year Nine. Too young. Too in love with their skateboards. They jump the gutter and watch Sophie cruise past. Johnny recognises her and waves. Jake gives her the finger.

Sophie turns off the road onto the dirt track curving around the racetrack. It's too dark in the grandstand to tell if Isaac is waiting or not. She pulls up and turns off the engine. The car smells of risotto.

She tries to imagine herself alone out here every night. It's so quiet. Moonlight reflects off the car's bonnet. She jumps as Isaac appears through the gloom.

She grabs the paper bag and hops out of the car. 'Your dinner has arrived,' she says.

Isaac attempts a smile but it doesn't come out right.

'I know,' Sophie adds. 'It is what it is. But Dad always cooks too much.'

Isaac leads Sophie up the stairs of the grandstand. On the middle seat, he's arranged two sets of cutlery, plates and paper napkins. Stuck in an empty can is a red candle. Isaac strikes a match and the top tier is bathed in a warm glow. They both sit legs astride the seat.

'It smells of vanilla,' Sophie says. She spies a dustpan and brush at the end of the grandstand, under a seat. She has a sudden urge to lean across the space and kiss Isaac, but makes do with taking the container from the paper bag and tipping the food on the plates. Lots for Isaac, a smidge for herself.

'I've already eaten,' she says. 'I didn't have the courage to ask my parents until after dinner.'

Isaac reaches under the seat and brings up a bottle of wine.

'It has a screw top,' he says, 'and is non-alcoholic.' He reaches into his backpack and produces two glasses. 'I've got a few things to return to the cafe tomorrow,' he adds.

Sophie pours the wine and picks up a glass.

‘I’ve ... I’ve never drunk wine,’ Isaac says.

‘Really?’

He takes a sip and pulls a face. Sophie laughs. The tin roof of the grandstand crackles as it cools. A pigeon coos from above.

‘Tell me all the other things you haven’t done,’ Sophie says.

‘There’s lots,’ Isaac says, counting down with his fingers. ‘Never been on a plane or driven a car, never had more than a hundred dollars at any time in my life, never won anything and ...’

‘And?’

‘Never had a girlfriend,’ he says, looking at the wine glass.

‘I can teach you how to drive and help you out with one of the others,’ Sophie offers.

‘You’re taking me on a plane?!’

A siren sounds in the distance and Isaac looks towards town. Sophie suspects the Kent twins are being chased by the cops. What passes as fun in town.

‘The longer I’m away from home,’ Isaac says. ‘The happier I am.’

Sophie reaches for his hand. ‘Next time we have dinner at my place,’ she says. ‘Trust me. My parents will love you.’

They eat and take occasional sips of wine. Finally, Isaac tips his wine into Sophie’s glass.

‘I can’t do it,’ he says. ‘It tastes like vinegar.’

‘So you give it to me!’ Sophie frowns in mock anger.

After dinner, Sophie packs the empty Tupperware container into the paper bag and slides it along the seat. She moves closer to Isaac.

‘You haven’t asked me the things I’ve never done,’ she says.

‘I bet you’ve been on a plane,’ he says.

‘It’s fun if you’re in a window seat,’ she answers. ‘Clouds and sky and all that red earth. But if you’re stuck in the middle row, it’s coughing passengers, men who spread their legs too wide and flashing screens on every seat back.’

‘Until you arrive,’ Isaac adds.

‘There’s always that,’ Sophie says. She sits up straight on the seat and looks across the racetrack.

‘Never been on a boat,’ she begins. ‘Not even a dinghy.’ She giggles. ‘Never been on detention. What a wuss!’

She squeezes Isaac’s hand, but keeps focusing on the distance and what she’s never done.

‘Never won a race or been selected as captain of anything,’ she adds. ‘Never been so drunk that I’ve vomited. And apart from some embarrassing kisses with boys at parties, my only boyfriend was Jeremy Lipton in Year Five.’

‘Jeremy?’ Isaac asks.

‘Glasses, buck teeth and an infatuation with insects,’ Sophie says. ‘It lasted a week.’

‘How did it start?’

‘Some of the girls in Year Five decided we were old enough for boyfriends,’ Sophie says. ‘I was left holding hands with the nerd.’ Sophie slaps her own wrist in mock admonishment. ‘Actually, that’s not fair. Jeremy was really lovely. He talked nonstop about grasshoppers and spiders. Did you know a grasshopper can eat half its body weight in a day?’

‘How did it end?’

‘I got dumped.’ Sophie giggles. ‘Grasshoppers were more interesting.’

‘Is he still around?’

Sophie shakes her head. Jeremy’s family left town before high school. A pity. Her town could use more of Jeremy and less of Butler.

‘So that’s my story,’ she says. ‘Oh yeah, and I’ve never had sex.’

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MALT

Sophie wakes to the bedside clock telling her she has hours before school. A magpie chortles in the garden. She fluffs the pillows, closes her eyes and remembers last night. The grandstand witnessed an intimate display after they both admitted to being virgins.

Isaac was clumsy and gentle. Sophie was just clumsy. Who knew that Isaac's hand on the bare skin of her stomach could make the veins in her temple throb, send her left knee twitching uncontrollably and give her a cramp in the arch of her foot? That she could shiver and sweat at the same time, discover nerve endings in the tips of her fingers and want to kiss a boy for as long as touch and sanity allowed.

They stopped before nakedness and serious discussion of condom availability. Sophie had taken a deep breath, rearranged her clothes and stared out into the darkness. The pigeons cooed.

'I don't want ...' she began, but couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. Maybe she did want to? Should she feel like this after just meeting a boy?

'Not like this,' Isaac said. His face was flushed and his hair even messier than usual.

'Maybe at my place,' Sophie added. As she said those words, her world shifted. To even consider making love with another person seemed so far away from school uniforms, lines at the canteen and the discussion of social media in English. Those were the daily chores of existence, what she did to fill up time and space. Making love? Was it making love if she didn't know if she was in love?

Before Isaac could say anything about her parents, Sophie had kissed him,

long and slow.

‘I’ll come up with a plan,’ she said.

Sophie jumped as a pigeon flapped away from the grandstand roof, disturbing the moment. She glanced at her watch. She was already twenty minutes late. She quickly texted her mum.

‘I just need to get my parents out of the house for a night,’ she said.

‘When was the last time that happened?’ Isaac asked.

Sophie didn’t have the heart to tell Isaac they never went away without her. But she’d come up with a plan. One that would work.

Sophie pulls the sheet up to her neck and stares out the window. That she can even think of making love with Isaac is captivating and ... ridiculous. Something so special deserves lengthy consideration. She feels the blood rush to her cheeks and closes her eyes again, picturing Isaac in the grandstand. She thinks of folding herself into his arms.

A few hours later at lunchtime, Sophie wanders the schoolyard searching for Sienna. Butler and his mates infect the seniors room with testosterone, and Sienna’s usual gang of girlfriends hang out on the verandah. Isabella sneers when Sophie walks past. In desperation, Sophie checks the library and the canteen. No Sienna. It isn’t until Biology she learns from Trudie that Sienna was on detention. Something to do with her skirt being an inappropriate length.

Sophie hovers between anger and hopelessness. While Butler and the boys run wild, Sienna gets punished because her skirt is a few centimetres too short. Maybe it was this that encouraged Ms Sims to take matters into her own hands in English? One rule for girls, none for boys.

After school, Sophie enters Joan’s Cafe, surprised again at how cool and dark it is inside. And quiet, as if from a different era. The time of Rebecca and milkshakes. Everything seems muted after the harsh light of Main Street. Joan, who is not Isaac’s mother, stands behind the counter and nods hello.

‘Is Isaac here?’ Sophie asks, hoping he’ll hear her voice and come out from the kitchen.

‘You’ve just missed him,’ she says. ‘He only works in the morning, but sometimes I can’t get rid of him.’ Joan smiles.

‘Oh.’ Sophie stands in the middle of the cafe not knowing what to do. Now Isaac isn’t here, she doesn’t really want a coffee.

‘Do you know where he lives?’ Joan asks.

Sophie is about to answer then realises Joan may not know Isaac doesn’t have a home.

‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘I’ll go there.’ Sophie turns to leave.

‘Have you outgrown milkshakes?’ Joan asks.

‘Never.’ Sophie walks back to the counter, decides Isaac can wait. ‘Maybe a vanilla, double-malted?’

Joan reaches into the fridge for a container. She holds it up for Sophie to see. ‘Ice cream?’

‘Of course,’ Sophie says, thinking how nice it is that Isaac works in a place with coffee and ice cream. Does she have the perfect boyfriend? If he is her boyfriend?

The milkshake machine whirs into action. Joan uses metal containers, so the milk stays frosty. Sophie sees Joan add an extra spoonful of malt and return the container to the machine for a final mix. She reaches across the counter for a straw as Joan brings her the drink.

‘It’s been ages,’ Sophie says. She pops the straw into the milkshake and takes a long slurp. It’s so cold her teeth ache. She twirls the straw in the container. ‘I’ve missed this,’ she admits, unsure if she’s talking about the drink or afternoons at Joan’s with Rebecca.

‘I make milkshakes for my grandson, Brodie,’ Joan says. ‘He asks for extra malt, just like you did.’ Joan gestures to the tables in the cafe. ‘You can sit down, if you prefer?’

‘I can’t stay long,’ she says, taking another long sip.

Who knew a mixture of malt, ice cream and milk was better than coffee,

better than pizza, better than ... a night alone with Isaac? Maybe not ... She blushes and takes another sip, hoping Joan hasn't noticed.

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LIBRARY

In the early afternoon, Isaac wanders the streets. He passes shopfronts covered with sale signs in red and white, with the old shop names in decorative type on the windows and a footpath stacked with display items.

He thinks of Sophie having to endure a day at school in the same classes as Butler and his mates. He stops outside the library, a glass-fronted building with vibrant yellow trim and a tiled concourse. A lone crow sits at the apex of the roof, scanning the surrounds for food. Isaac smiles to himself – a black bird at the entrance can only be a positive sign. The crow answers with a single caw.

Inside the library are rows of deep lounge chairs surrounding a low table scattered with newspapers. An old man in a blue cardigan sits reading a magazine, a trio of mums with their babies are listening to storytime in a separate room and an elderly lady is on a laptop at the desk beside the window.

Isaac wonders if there's a way to make Joan's Cafe more like this place – a haven for everyone. Maybe he'll suggest they raid the second-hand shops for books and magazines and place them on the vacant display shelves on the walls?

He wanders the aisles. So many lives invented and recorded and remembered. He stops at a random shelf and decides to choose a book by its title.

Boomtown Summer.

The Gift of Mercy.

In Times of Pestilence and Popcorn.

Isaac reaches for the book. Its cover is cool white with a spray of yellow

popcorn, the title in jaunty blue.

‘It’s a great book,’ a voice says from down the aisle. A woman in a dark-green outfit, with a librarian badge pinned to her chest, points at the book in Isaac’s hand. ‘I borrowed it for my daughter,’ she adds. ‘She finished it in a day.’

‘Is it Australian?’ Isaac asks.

The woman nods. ‘I reckon you’d like it.’

‘All librarians say that,’ Isaac says.

She laughs. ‘You’ve got me there. But at least I’m not trying to sell you something. It’s free.’

‘I haven’t got a library card,’ he says. He motions to put the book back.

‘I can solve that in a minute, if you want.’ The woman steps towards him. ‘It’ll get me away from the shelves for a while.’

‘I ... I don’t know.’ Isaac is sure he’ll need to give her personal details. ‘Maybe I should go.’ He looks towards the exit.

‘Wait,’ the woman says. ‘If you don’t want a card, you can still read it in here.’

Isaac likes the feel of the book in his hand.

‘I’m not much of a librarian if I scare off potential readers,’ the woman adds.

Isaac notices her name tag reads *Sophie*.

‘Make yourself at home,’ she says. ‘Lounges at the front and back. Study desks upstairs, and unlimited wi-fi. But a book is better than Google. Trust me.’ She winks at Isaac.

Sophie the librarian walks back down the aisle and returns to her shelving trolley. Isaac holds the book, appreciating the cover, before retreating to a lounge chair at the rear of the library. As he sits down, he smiles at the thought of one Sophie taking his mind off the other Sophie.

He opens the book and begins reading.

HEADPHONES

Gerry stands behind the counter of the council office and glances at the clock on the wall. One more customer before finishing time. Soon he'll be changing into lycra and cycling home, the sun firing the wheatfields on his usual circuit along the quiet back roads north of town.

He thinks of how much he looks forward to arriving home from work every afternoon. Of seeing Dana in the garden, coaxing life back into the herb and veggie patch, how she shields her face from the setting sun and always greets him with a kiss, the smell of shampoo and soil an intoxicating mix. Sophie will be in her room, crouching over another linocut, the blade steady in her hands. One more year before she leaves home for art college. He's proud their daughter is so involved in her art. Like he was with poetry.

He wonders if he should start writing again. One slim volume was not enough. Then he shakes the thought from his mind. The only poetry he wants to write is graffiti scrawled across lying advertisements. It's quicker, more direct and reaches a wider audience. Now he gets his fulfilment from cycling through the countryside, sitting in the garden with his wife and watching Sophie navigate the world.

Someone coughs and brings Gerry back to the council office. He calls the next customer to his window. A lady with grey hair, a teal cardigan and flat-soled walking shoes comes to his counter. She hands across the ticket.

'How are you, dear?' she asks.

'All the better for being called "dear",' Gerry says.

'Oh, don't mind me. I call everyone that,' she says. The lady opens her handbag and shuffles around inside, before finding a letter, which she hands across to Gerry.

He takes a moment to read it.

‘I’m a little worried,’ the lady says.

‘It’s just a form letter,’ Gerry explains. ‘Someone has complained about noise.’

‘That’d be my Mozart,’ she says. ‘I’m a little hard of hearing.’

Gerry thinks anyone would be lucky to have this lady as a neighbour. He’s not sure what to say.

‘My neighbour complained about it yesterday,’ she says. ‘He banged on my door and used a few words not suitable for public discourse.’

‘You mean he swore?’

‘Loudly and frequently.’

‘Oh,’ Gerry says.

‘He works the night shift at the supermarket,’ she explains. ‘But I do love my music.’

‘Have you thought of headphones?’ Gerry suggests.

The woman looks a bit confused. ‘For him or me?’ she asks.

‘For you,’ Gerry says.

The woman touches her hair, which is done up in an elaborate bun. Gerry knows what she’s thinking.

‘They’re adjustable,’ he adds.

‘It’s just I’m ... I’m not good with modern technology,’ she says. She takes the letter from Gerry’s hand and looks at it again, as if the solution is somewhere on the page.

‘If you buy a pair of headphones,’ he says. ‘I’ll come round and get them set up, if there’s no-one else who can help.’

‘Really, dear?’

‘You keep calling me “dear” and I’ll expect a cup of tea and some Iced VoVos as well,’ he jokes.

The lady laughs. ‘I’ll go and buy them right away,’ she says. ‘The headphones, that is. Not the Iced VoVos.’

Gerry writes his mobile number on the council card and hands it to the

lady.

‘Give us a call,’ he says. ‘And I’ll see what I can do.’

The lady walks to the door and waves. Gerry smiles. He’ll ignore council policy on home visits in this instance.

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RIVER

Sophie traces an outline on the linoleum of a river, shaded by jacaranda trees. She's not sure she can cut such fine detail, but is determined to try. If it works, this will be a present for Isaac. Not for his birthday. Just for being ... well ... for being him. For being quiet and attentive and self-assured. For being like no-one else she's ever met.

After the milkshake at Joan's, Sophie decided to come straight home and begin this linocut for Isaac.

She looks out her bedroom window to the garden and the empty chairs where her parents sit every night. A wattlebird flies from the grevillea and lands on the cubbyhouse. Closing her eyes again, Sophie remembers the last time she visited the river at Patchett Bend. It was with her mum and dad a few weeks ago on a cloudy Monday afternoon. Her parents had both clocked off early from work and were waiting for her in the car outside the school gate. Her mum had packed her swimmers and there was an esky beside her seat in the back. It was Dana's birthday and she'd chosen a picnic beside the river.

Sophie's dad spread the blanket under the jacaranda trees and made a big thing of picking up the fallen purple blooms and placing them in a circle around the blanket. He stepped back and admired his handiwork.

'She who steps inside will be loved forever,' he said.

Sophie and her mum both jumped onto the blanket, laughing.

'Talk about eager!' Her dad reached into the picnic basket and brought out an orange cake with five candles. 'One for every decade,' he said.

Sophie's mum lit the candles, closed her eyes and made a wish. Gerry offered his wife the knife and she cut three large slices.

‘I’ll save the rest for the girls at work,’ she said. ‘Unless we have seconds.’

Sophie’s dad had baked the cake the night before like he did every year for each of their birthdays. Orange cake for Dana, cheesecake for Sophie and pavlova for himself. The family had a deal about presents. Fifty dollars to the birthday person’s charity of choice and the cards had to be homemade, or the daggiest they could find at the newsagency. It was an unspoken rule that the family would spend birthdays together, even if it was only the afternoon. No work meeting, no overtime, no study would get in the way of these three sacred days.

After the cake, her dad removed a bottle of champagne and three plastic flutes from the esky. After one glass, chilled and sweet, Sophie returned to the car and changed into her swimmers. She watched her parents sitting on the blanket holding hands, looking across the river to the dairy farm elevated above the rocky bank.

Sophie’s dad stood and walked to the sandy bank. At the bend, the river flowed in deep pools of water. The wind filtered down from the hills and rippled the surface. He turned to his wife and held out his hand. Dana stood and stepped outside the ring of jacaranda flowers.

They turned to the river, held hands and ran across the sand before diving into the water. Splashing around, her dad called for Sophie to hurry up. Sophie hopped out of the car and ran to the bank, following them into the bracing flow. Purple leaves floated on the surface and Sophie scooped a few, tossing them into the air. Her mum laughed.

‘Tell me again,’ Sophie said. They both knew what she meant.

Dana swam close and brushed the water from her daughter’s face. The three of them moved into deeper water away from the bank. If Sophie stood on tiptoe, she could just touch the sandy bottom.

‘How many times have you heard this story?’ Dana said.

‘The champagne makes me forget.’ Sophie laughed. She knew her mum loved to tell the story. And Sophie loved to hear it, not because of the detail

but to watch the light in her parents' eyes.

'Your dad was offered a job,' Dana begins, 'out here in the middle of nowhere.'

'We'd never even heard of this town,' Gerry added.

'We came for the weekend and stayed in a room at the Courthouse Hotel,' Dana continued. 'We didn't think much of the town. Just shops, a racetrack, houses and a few schools surrounded by wheatfields and sheep farms.'

'Until we found this place,' Gerry adds.

Sophie looked up at the wispy clouds strung across the blue. A breeze rustled the leaves in the jacarandas and a few more blooms drifted onto the river.

'We came here at dusk,' Dana said. 'There was no-one around. When I saw the purple flowers on the water, it was like no place I'd ever been before.'

Sophie scooped up a jacaranda bloom and held it close to her nose. Everyone from school swam at the swimming hole near the old bridge, much closer to town. No-one could be bothered coming out to the river at the end of a dirt road prone to flooding.

'There's a song I love,' her dad said. 'About a couple who go down to the river to wash away their past.' He laughed. 'It's a cliché, I know. But just because something's a cliché doesn't make it wrong. Or stupid.'

Sophie noticed the glance between her parents. Sophie thought love was a cliché. Or was it something to believe in?

'Have you two ever been unhappy?' she asked.

'Sure,' Dana answered. 'Some days at work.'

'No. I mean with each other,' Sophie said.

'How could anyone be unhappy with me?' her dad shot back.

'Your dad plans to live to be one hundred years old,' Dana said, 'so he refuses to worry about stuff.' She looked across at her husband. 'He takes his black pen and crosses out things he doesn't agree with and hopes that's enough.'

‘I’m fixing the world,’ he interjected.

‘As if you can edit your life as easily as a poem,’ Dana said.

‘It’s not that. I’m getting it out of my system. Stuff the world and its stupidity. I don’t have to agree with it. Wasn’t that what the punk movement was about?’

Dana scoffed.

‘Yeah, I know. The middle-aged punk who wears lycra on the weekend and works at the council. But if our youth is to mean anything, it’s that –’ Gerry looked to the sky for the words ‘– those beliefs hold fast whether you’re fifteen or fifty-five. If we forget our values, what else is there?’

Dana swam into her husband’s arms and they kissed.

Sophie had her answer. Unhappiness? Not with each other. Not with somewhere to feel peace.

Sophie didn’t tell her parents, but sometimes on the weekend, she’d ride her bike out to Patchett Bend, shaking over the corrugations, to swim in the river alone.

Sophie looks down at her linocut. She draws a blanket and a circle of flowers, admiring the symmetry. It’s ready to be cut. She decides to make two copies. One for Isaac. One for her parents.

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GLASS

The next morning, Isaac walks along Main Street. The clouds rumble in from the west, threatening rain. He checks his watch. He's earlier than usual. After opening the front door of the cafe, Isaac switches on all the lights and begins preparing the coffee machine and loading the fridge. He feels useful. The world is ordered and safe.

The bell above the door rings. Gerry walks to the counter, dressed in black trousers and an open-necked shirt. Isaac remembers his promise from the weekend.

'I hope it's okay?' Gerry asks. 'I thought I'd beat the rush hour.'

Isaac tries not to laugh. He gestures for Gerry to come around to the business side of the counter. They shake hands.

'No lycra today?' Isaac asks.

'I didn't think it was appropriate for a barista.' Gerry grins. 'I pay for every coffee we make,' he adds. 'It may take a while.'

The two men stand at the machine and Isaac goes through each of the steps, just the way Joan showed him last week. He watches Gerry lean down and study each of the moving parts, weighing the portafilter and milk jug in his hands. Isaac has never seen anyone so focused.

'Let's start with an espresso for you,' Isaac says. 'Then you can make me a flat white.'

Isaac steps aside and Gerry cleans the portafilter under the hot waterspout, even though it's already clean. He grinds the coffee and tamps the grounds into the filter. Isaac thinks he's pushed down too hard but doesn't say anything, waiting for the finished product. Gerry slips the cup under the filter and presses the button. They both watch the coffee ooze through the

filter as if witnessing magic.

‘It’s perfect,’ Isaac says.

Gerry lifts the cup away from the machine and holds it to his nose. ‘It smells like coffee. That’s a start.’

Isaac gestures for Gerry to take a sip. Gerry raises the cup to his lips.

‘Not bad,’ he says. Isaac wonders how long he’ll keep grinning.

‘Now the milk,’ Isaac says.

Gerry cleans the portafilter and makes another espresso before turning his attention to the steam wand and milk jug. Once again, he masters it at a single attempt. He pours a little hesitantly, breaking the crema.

‘Bugger,’ he says.

Isaac picks up the cup and sips. ‘It’s absolutely fine,’ he says. ‘Strong and just the right temperature.’

‘Wow,’ Gerry says.

They both finish their coffees and rinse the cups in the sink. After Gerry finishes cleaning the machine, he reaches into his back pocket and takes out a credit card.

‘I’m paying for both coffees,’ he says. ‘No argument, Isaac.’

‘Will you buy your own machine now?’ Isaac asks.

‘Maybe,’ Gerry says. ‘But it won’t be the same as this.’ Gerry looks around the cafe. ‘You know, this place hasn’t changed in all the years I’ve been a customer.’

Isaac doesn’t know what to say. Perhaps he could suggest to Joan that they paint the walls, but he suspects she doesn’t have enough money and prefers the place as it’s always been.

Once again, the two men shake hands and Gerry walks to the door, but then turns. ‘If you ever want a sickie, you know who to call,’ he says. ‘I’ve got lots of holiday leave at my job, so I can replace you for a few hours. If Joan’s okay with it.’

Isaac nods and waves. He picks up the milk bottle and returns it to the fridge, moving the bottles around on the shelf so the milk with the earlier

use-by date is at the front. The bell above the door rings again. Isaac guesses Gerry has forgotten something.

Butler and Lachlan stand at the counter. Butler is smirking. Lachlan shuffles from side to side.

‘You were right, Lachlan,’ Butler says as he saunters towards the coffee machine. ‘Sophie’s friend is playing at being a barista.’

Isaac opens and closes his fists. Lachlan must have seen him behind the counter on the way to school one morning. A steady rain begins to fall as a delivery van rolls down the street. If they fight in Joan’s, there’ll be damage to bodies and furniture. Isaac feels a pulse bulging in his temple. Butler picks a packet of Minties off the rack and dangles it from his fingers.

‘Maybe I’ll buy a packet of Minties.’ He smirks, before dropping it on the floor. ‘Or maybe not.’

Isaac doesn’t move, weighing up his options. Punch Butler? Or punch Lachlan first and then deal with Butler? He’s confident one punch will be enough for Lachlan.

Butler picks up another packet of Minties and tosses it to Lachlan, who catches it with both hands. Lachlan stares at the packet for a few seconds then places it on a table.

Butler kicks the Minties packet on the floor. ‘You really don’t keep a very clean cafe, mate.’

Isaac walks around the counter. Lachlan takes a step towards the door. Butler doesn’t move.

‘Let’s take it outside,’ Isaac says.

‘Fuck you,’ Butler responds. He flicks his hair away from his eyes. Isaac notices Butler wears steel-capped work boots, while Lachlan prefers runners. One for fight, the other for flight. Isaac is trapped in a fight he doesn’t want, one that could wreck the joint. He’s got to get this over with quickly.

He spies an old lady in a blue-and-white dress making her way along the footpath with the aid of a four-wheeled walking trolley, an open umbrella

attached to the frame. She stops for breath outside the cafe. After a few seconds, she sets off again down the street. Lachlan inches closer to the front door.

Isaac wonders how he can avoid a fight. What if he doesn't respond? Or disappears out the back door?

He retreats to the business side of the counter.

'How can I help?' he says. 'Would you like a free coffee for being a new customer?' He hopes backing down will be enough. Let Butler think he's won.

'I wouldn't drink your slop if you paid me,' Butler says. He steps towards the cash register. 'Actually, I take it back,' Butler says. 'We'll both have a coffee and all the money from your till.'

'Are you serious?' Isaac would sure like another customer now.

'Two coffees and fifty bucks,' Butler says. 'My final offer.'

The vein in Isaac's temple threatens to explode. There's no way out now. Fight or lose Joan's money.

'I'll just be a second,' he says, striding to the kitchen. There's a hammer under the sink near the door. He reaches down and grips the handle; it's heavy in his hands. He promised himself he'd never use violence again. Closing his eyes, he runs his fingers along the cold steel head. Just the sight of a weapon would force Lachlan to retreat. But Butler? Isaac pictures his father smirking into the bathroom mirror.

He returns the hammer under the sink and walks to the back door, hoping to wait it out in the alley. If Butler has no-one to fight, maybe he'll just leave with the packet of Minties. As Isaac grips the door handle, he hears a shuffling from inside the cafe. He peers around the corner. Butler is leaning over the counter and trying to open the cash register.

Isaac takes a deep breath, returns to the sink and grabs the hammer.

Some promises are impossible to keep.

'Hey,' Isaac calls, stepping back into the cafe.

Both boys see the hammer in his hand. Lachlan moves towards the door.

‘Lachlan,’ Butler calls.

‘He’s got a hammer, for fuck’s sake,’ Lachlan says, his voice high.

‘You pussy!’ Butler sneers at Isaac. ‘Hiding behind a weapon.’

‘I caught you stealing.’

The bell rings above the door. Lachlan stands at the entrance, ready to run.

‘Come on, Butler,’ he calls.

Butler looks at the packet of Minties on the floor. He reaches down and picks it up before backing away.

Isaac doesn’t move. He’s not getting into a fight over a packet of lollies.

Butler walks to the door before pointing at Isaac. ‘You’re a coward,’ he shouts.

Isaac doesn’t mind being called names, particularly by someone running away. Butler slams the door shut and both boys give Isaac the finger through the front window before disappearing down the street.

Isaac sinks to his haunches and takes a series of long, slow breaths. He closes his eyes.

They know where he works. It’s not over.

Isaac puts the hammer back then opens the cash register and pays for the Minties from his own pocket. Butler owes him one.

A few minutes later, Isaac is still sweating and shaking. The air in the cafe is heavy and stale, in need of a fresh breeze. He walks to the back door and opens it wide to the alley. Rain tumbles down. A ginger cat prowls along the bitumen. Isaac looks past the scatter of backyards to the distant hills. A plume of smoke wiggles skywards. Above the town, a single hawk floats.

He latches the door open before returning to the counter, spying the other packet of Minties on the table where Lachlan tossed them. He walks around to pick them up. As he reaches the table, he looks out the front window.

Butler is standing on the footpath in the rain, glancing up and down the street. Isaac checks the clock on the wall. Still an hour before Joan arrives. Both boys stand still, looking at one another. Isaac takes a step towards the front door to lock it. He’ll keep backing down if it means not fighting.

Butler shouts and tosses something at the window.

The world explodes.

Butler's image contorts as the window shatters and fragments of glass scatter across the linoleum. Isaac runs to the door. By the time he makes it outside, Butler is halfway down the street. Isaac sprints a few metres then stops. There's no way he can catch him.

He walks back and stares at the window. A fist-sized hole is in the centre of the glass, cracks and fissures radiating out. Isaac remembers the television in his lounge room. For one brief moment, he sees the window as payback for his own vandalism. Except this hurts Joan as well. He swears under his breath, looking down the street. Butler is gone.

Isaac shuffles back into the cafe and gets a dustpan and brush from the kitchen. He methodically cleans every sliver of glass from the floor before going to the footpath and scraping up the rest. He wraps the glass in newspaper and places it in the rubbish bin.

In the centre of the cafe is the rock Butler tossed. Isaac picks it up and carries it to the back alley, dropping it in the gutter. He stares down at it for a few seconds as if his answer is in a piece of granite. Isaac looks up to the hawk still wheeling above the town. He wonders if that hawk can see Butler running all the way to school.

Isaac walks around the block to the front of the cafe to once again survey the damage. He stands at the window, afraid every rumble of a truck will cause the glass to shatter into a million pieces.

Back in the kitchen, he searches the cupboards for tape, then he binds each of the cracks. He's not sure if it helps, but he has to do something.

OXYMORON

Sophie walks through the school gate as the rain stops, and is pushed from behind. She turns, expecting an apologetic young kid. Instead, Lachlan brushes past her with a red face. He smirks at Sophie, as if he knows something she doesn't. So much for his apology.

'Blossom,' a quiet voice says. She turns to see Trudie. Instinctively Sophie looks down. One sock up, one sock bunched around her ankle. Sophie wonders if Trudie is aware of the fashion statement.

'That's what my dad calls me,' Trudie says. 'Whenever I look unhappy.'

'What do you do when he calls you that?' Sophie looks at Trudie as a bunch of Year Eight boys rush past. Trudie shoulders an over-packed bag and shuffles off the path out of their way.

'I laugh at how silly it sounds,' Trudie answers.

Sophie thinks of her dad and his daggy jokes, how they relieve the tension, turn whatever mood was building inside her into relief and laughter.

Butler strolls through the gate. He stops a few metres away from the girls and grins. Trudie ignores him, turning her back, yet straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin, as if bracing for an insult.

Butler carries a packet of Minties in his hand. He rips it open and offers Sophie one, an insufferable leer on his face.

'A treat, Sophie,' he says. 'You could use a bit of sweetness.'

'Piss off, loser.' Sophie is surprised at the anger in her voice.

Butler looks down at the packet and scowls. 'I didn't pay for these Minties,' he says. 'Your friend ... lost them.'

Sophie doesn't understand. What friend? Isaac?

‘You’ll keep,’ Butler adds, shoving the Minties into his pocket and walking away.

Sophie wonders what Butler has done.

‘Now that’s how to handle unwanted trash,’ Trudie’s voice brings her back.

‘If only it was that easy.’ Sophie feels a knot twisting in her stomach.

Trudie tilts her head as if considering what Sophie has said. Sophie begins walking to the gym, gesturing for Trudie to walk with her.

‘Physical Education,’ Trudie says. ‘Is that an oxymoron?’

‘It could be worse,’ Sophie says.

‘Yeah, Butler could have offered me a Mintie,’ Trudie says.

Sophie can’t help but laugh.

‘What’s the joke?’ a voice asks behind them. Sophie turns and sees Sienna. She notices Trudie tense and turn away, just like she did with Butler.

‘We were talking about boys,’ Sophie says.

‘Fuck ’em,’ Sienna says.

‘Or ignore them,’ Trudie says, shuffling from one foot to the other.

Sienna raises an eyebrow and grins at Sophie. ‘Never a wiser word has been spoken,’ Sienna adds.

Trudie smiles.

‘We’re going to Phys Ed,’ Sophie says to Sienna. ‘You coming?’

Sienna rolls her eyes. ‘Nothing I like more than running around in a short skirt.’

Sophie makes room for Sienna on the path and the three of them walk to class. It’s good to have friends in school again. Her phone rings and she removes it from her pocket. It’s Isaac. Both girls look at her.

‘I’ll just be a second.’ She stops and walks under the stairs, where it’s quiet and dark.

‘Isaac?’

‘Hi,’ he says. His voice sounds strange: strangled, tense.

‘What’s wrong?’ she whispers, thinking of Butler a few moments ago.

‘I don’t know if I can make it on Saturday.’

Sophie waits. She hears a truck horn through the phone and imagines Isaac is outside Joan’s.

‘What’s up?’ she asks. ‘I’ve arranged to borrow my parents’ car.’

‘Someone smashed the front window of the cafe,’ Isaac says. ‘I’ll need to help Joan for the rest of the week.’

Sophie watches a bunch of boys walk past, tossing a basketball between each other. She steps further into the stairwell.

‘It was Butler.’ Isaac’s voice is barely audible. ‘He threw a rock and smashed the window.’

Now Sophie understands what Lachlan was smirking about, why Butler had laughed at the school gate.

‘Was Lachlan with him?’ Sophie asks.

‘How do you know?’ Isaac’s voice is surprised.

‘Butler wouldn’t have the guts to do it alone,’ Sophie says. The school bell rings.

‘Can I do anything to help?’ she asks.

Another car horn blasts through the speaker.

‘It’s okay,’ Isaac says. ‘I’ll ... I’ll think of something.’

They hang up and Sophie runs to class. If only she could tell Sienna and Trudie, tell Joan, tell the world that Butler is an arsehole. But he is an arsehole with lots of friends at school and a mayor as his father.

APRON

Isaac puts the phone in his pocket as Joan enters the cafe. Her face is pale. She walks to where he stands, the tape still in his hands.

‘Are you okay?’ she asks.

Isaac doesn’t trust his voice. He nods.

He turns away from the window and walks to a table opposite the coffee machine. His legs are shaking so much he has to sit down.

‘I need a coffee,’ Joan says.

Isaac stands to make it for her but she waves him back down. He watches her walk to the apron stand and choose a dark-blue one with vertical lines. Isaac shakes his head when she asks if he’d like a coffee. He’s trying to decide what to tell her. The truth? Or a story to avoid the conflict with Butler?

‘Do you know what happened?’ Joan asks.

‘A boy chucked a rock,’ Isaac begins. He swallows hard. ‘We ... we had a disagreement at a party on Saturday night and he found out where I worked.’

Joan stirs her coffee and takes a sip.

‘I’m sorry, Joan.’ Isaac’s bottom lip begins to tremble.

‘He threw the rock, not you,’ Joan says. ‘Do you know his name?’

Isaac shuffles in his seat. ‘It’s my word against his,’ he says. ‘No-one else saw it.’

‘That’s for the police to decide.’ Joan reaches for her phone.

‘Please, Joan,’ Isaac says.

She looks at him, confused.

‘If the police are called, they’ll ask me questions.’

‘That’s the whole point,’ Joan says.

‘They’ll ask my name and ... my address.’ Isaac’s voice is quiet.

‘So?’

‘I ... I don’t have an address.’

‘Everyone has an—’

‘I sleep at the racetrack,’ Isaac interrupts. ‘In the grandstand.’

Joan grips the fabric of the apron in her fist, staring at the coffee cup on the table, then back at the shattered window.

‘I wake early and come here,’ Isaac continues. ‘I mind my own business.’

‘Until now,’ Joan adds.

Isaac doesn’t know what else to say. The old lady with the walker makes her way back down the footpath, stopping to glance at the shattered window.

‘A boy shouldn’t be homeless,’ Joan says, looking at Isaac.

‘I’m not,’ Isaac says. ‘I sleep at the racetrack. I arrived in town the first day you gave me raisin toast.’ He looks down at his shoes under the table. ‘I wasn’t planning on staying,’ he says. ‘But you were so kind.’ He doesn’t trust himself to say any more.

‘Is it safe at the track?’ Joan asks.

‘It’s quiet.’ Isaac shrugs. ‘I like it.’

Joan finishes her coffee, takes the cup to the sink and washes it. Neither person speaks for a long time. She unties her apron and reties it even tighter, as if getting down to work.

‘We have to call the police,’ Joan says. ‘I need the report for insurance.’

Isaac nods.

She walks back to the table and sits down, reaching across to hold Isaac’s hand. ‘We’ll tell them you’re staying at my place,’ Joan adds. ‘I have a spare bedroom and needed the rent money.’

‘What about the guy who threw the rock?’ Isaac asks.

‘Who is it?’

‘His name’s Butler,’ Isaac says.

‘Oh Christ.’ Joan leans back in the chair. ‘The mayor’s son?’

Isaac nods.

‘We’ll say the window was broken when you arrived.’ Joan’s voice is calm. ‘The less you’re involved the better.’

‘Do you know Butler?’ Isaac asks. He’s still holding the tape in his hands. Joan leans across and takes it from him before standing.

‘I’m ... aware of his father,’ Joan says. ‘We won’t get much joy there.’

‘I’m sorry, Joan,’ Isaac repeats.

‘Don’t keep saying that. Let’s just get this done so I can fix the window.’

The bell rings and a mother struggles to enter with her infant son. Isaac rushes to hold the door open for her as Joan retreats to the kitchen. The mother and child sit at a table near the shattered window. Isaac takes their order, pleased he has something to do other than talk about Butler. As he makes the woman’s coffee, he memorises Joan’s address and goes over his story to the police. Before taking the woman her coffee, Isaac pours a cup of warm frothy milk sprinkled with chocolate on top for the child, as a surprise. When he takes the cups to the table, the woman beams with delight.

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PUDDLES

After Physical Education, Sophie zombie-walks to English. She sits behind Butler and stares at the back of his head, wanting him gone from school. Throwing rocks at windows? She looks across the room. Sienna winks at her. Sophie smiles back but it comes out like a grimace. Sienna pulls a face in return. Sophie's next smile is genuine.

Ms Sims discusses the merits of first-person narrator versus third-person. Everyone agrees that if the story is boring, it doesn't matter how it's told. The class launch into a long discussion on boredom. Sophie likes books, no matter how badly written. Books and boredom don't go together. Ever. She's in the minority.

At recess, Sophie retreats to her usual seat behind the library. The day turns grey with misty rain, but there's enough overhang from the library to keep her seat dry. She closes her eyes and tries to imagine what Isaac is doing now. She worked until late last night focusing on her new linocut. She was so tired at midnight she could barely hold the pfeil. When she gets home this afternoon, she'll finish the last few cuts, then begin printing. Two perfect prints, she hopes.

She remembers what happened in the grandstand. She can't wait to see Isaac again, to feel his body close. Who knew you could have that much fun in the dark with a boy.

But now she's got him involved with Butler. She wonders how Isaac will explain a broken window to Joan.

'Are you sleeping?' a voice whispers.

Sophie opens her eyes to Sienna, leaning close.

'I wish,' Sophie says. She moves along the seat to give Sienna space.

Neither girl speaks for a few minutes, looking across to the students in the canteen line huddled under an awning. A few boys persist with basketball on the court despite the rain.

‘Where are your friends?’ Sophie asks.

‘I’m beginning to think they’re a little ... superficial,’ Sienna says.

‘No!’

‘Okay, correction,’ Sienna says. ‘Very superficial.’

Sophie thinks her of discussion with Trudie in the library about poetry.

‘They keep asking if Butler and I will get back together,’ Sienna says. ‘I’d rather gargle glass.’

‘Butler smashed a window at the cafe where Isaac works,’ Sophie says, then immediately regrets it. She heard the words ‘Butler’ and ‘glass’ and just said what was preoccupying her.

‘He what?’

Sophie doesn’t repeat it.

‘Shit,’ Sienna says. ‘He needs taking down.’

‘You sound like a hard arse.’

Sienna laughs. It’s not the same laugh Sophie’s heard when Sienna’s with her friends. It’s real, from the heart.

‘Where does Isaac work?’ Sienna asks.

‘Joan’s Cafe.’

‘That dark place opposite Grind? I thought it was for old people.’

‘Maybe it is,’ Sophie says. ‘Now it’s got a smashed front window.’

‘Will Isaac get in trouble?’

‘Joan’s nice,’ Sophie says. ‘But it’s Isaac’s word against Butler’s.’

Sienna stands, her fists clenched.

Sophie reaches up and grabs Sienna’s arm.

‘What?’ Sienna asks.

‘Don’t make it worse,’ Sophie pleads. ‘Please.’

Sienna sits back down and lets out a long sigh.

The rain blows across the schoolyard. Sophie wonders how long it’ll be

before Butler returns to the cafe and causes more trouble. She feels so helpless.

‘We could go to the principal,’ Sienna suggests.

Sophie’s relieved she said *we*, not *you*.

‘But we didn’t witness it, and Lachlan would side with Butler,’ Sophie says.

‘Maybe we could confront him,’ Sienna says. ‘The two of us.’

‘With what?’ Sophie asks. ‘Unless we lie and say we saw it happen, we don’t have anything.’

‘Are you willing to lie?’ Sienna’s voice is quiet.

Sophie glances at Sienna. ‘I’d ... I’d prefer another solution.’

Sienna leans forward on the bench. ‘I’ve got it!’ She grins and clicks her fingers. ‘CCTV footage.’

‘You watch too many crime shows,’ Sophie says. ‘Even if there was footage we couldn’t get access to it.’

Sienna frowns. ‘It’s easy on TV,’ she says, leaning back. ‘Cops find the footage in a few minutes.’

Sophie looks across at the boys stamping in the puddles, kicking water at each other, laughing. She remembers her dad talking about the council installing cameras at various locations along Main Street in an anti-crime blitz that Butler’s dad had launched just before the last election.

‘Cops need evidence to prove a case,’ she says, turning to Sienna. ‘But we just need Butler to believe we have proof.’

‘So ... so if we make Butler think we have the footage,’ Sienna says, ‘he won’t try anything again.’

Sophie smiles. ‘We’re smarter than Butler,’ she says.

‘An ant is smarter than Butler,’ Sienna answers.

‘He’s finished.’ Sophie knows just what she has to do. If she has the courage.

The bell rings. Sienna stands and reaches for Sophie’s hand. They walk to class together. The Year Nine boys snigger when they walk past.

Sienna leans in close to Sophie. 'It's your haircut.'
'It's 'cause you won't let go of my hand,' Sophie responds.
They laugh all the way to Maths.

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SCARECROW

Isaac trudges the streets of town until the grassy footpaths give way to open road and bone-dry paddocks. He alternates between the white line on the edge of the bitumen and the patchy weeds alongside the ditch. The wind whips down from the hills. A flock of cockatoos land in a recently sown field, white dots in the furrowed soil. A scarecrow of timber and straw stands impotent in a pose that reminds Isaac of Jesus on the cross. The cockatoos flap and squawk, surrounding the scarecrow. Sun fires the horizon.

Isaac thinks about his conversation with the two police officers outside the cafe. They each had batons and revolvers strapped around their hips like clumsy gunslingers. The male officer wore shiny black boots and his pants were a fraction too short, exposing brightly coloured blue-and-white football socks. The constable wrote Isaac's answers in a small notepad. The young female officer asked most of the questions, in a nasal voice.

Isaac answered as simply as possible. He arrived at Joan's at six-thirty this morning to find the damaged window, saw no-one in the street other than a few passing cars and cleaned up the mess while waiting for Joan to arrive. He didn't call her because he knew she had to mind her grandson until school started. The window wasn't going anywhere. When he told them he lived at Joan's, the officers exchanged glances but didn't ask any more questions. They shook his hand and had a brief word with Joan inside the cafe.

Isaac served the customers while Joan retreated to the kitchen with her phone, organising repairs and insurance quotes. After lunch, a portly man in a suit and tie entered the cafe, carrying a leather briefcase. He sat at the

table near the window and discussed figures with Joan, accepting her offer of cake and coffee. Isaac brought it to the table while the man explained the excess Joan would have to pay and promised a speedy assessment. It didn't improve Joan's mood. Isaac worked until closing time but instead of returning to the racetrack, he set off in the opposite direction.

Wandering.

Wandering all the way to the steel-and-wood archway at the entrance to Butler's family farm: Highton Estate.

Isaac stares at the property and smacks a fly from his wrist. The fields are tinder-dry despite the recent rain, sage bush and wild grass bent to the wind. He wonders if he has the guts to kneel in the grass behind the barbed-wire fence and light a match. Watch the farm erupt in a fireball.

One match.

Payback.

Isaac follows the perimeter fence as it circles the homestead, across barren creek beds and along narrow ditches until it begins to climb, looping up into the rocky hills at the rear of the property. He clambers over the rough ground, stalking the homestead. A windmill clanks in the yard. Overalls, school uniforms, sports shirts and a vibrant red dress with sparkles around the collar flutter on the clothesline. An inflatable dinosaur floats on the surface of the pool.

On the summit of a tree-lined hill, he sits in the shade on a smooth granite boulder. He's rewarded with a birds-eye view of the homestead and its surrounding land. A smudge of dust rises near the perimeter fence as a truck unloads sheep into a yard, their hooves clattering down the metal ramp.

A quad bike roars to life near the sheep as they scatter. The rider guns it through the herd, a high-pitched whine trekking across the paddocks towards the homestead. The rider leaps a ditch, landing in a pitch of dust as he struggles to hold the bike steady. He's wearing a helmet, but Isaac knows it's Butler. The bike pulls up outside the front gate to the house. Butler hops off, wipes his hands on his jeans and struggles with the chain on the gate,

before riding through the opening into a shed, emerging soon after to close the gate. He's exchanged the helmet for a wide-brimmed hat.

Isaac stands on the boulder.

'Look up here, you arsehole,' he says to himself.

He wishes he had enough strength to dislodge the boulder and let it roll down the hill, tracking its murderous rampage through the dandelions all the way to the homestead. He imagines it bursting through the perimeter fence and careering into Butler in the yard.

A force of nature. An act of God. An accident.

An accident, like a broken window.

'Look up,' Isaac repeats.

Butler takes the verandah steps in easy bounds and disappears into the house. A screen door slams and music blasts through an open window. Isaac is sure no-one else is home. He slides off the boulder and walks down the hill, dodging the sheep droppings, making a beeline for the shed. When he reaches the fence, he lifts his t-shirt and wipes the grit from his face, before spreading the strands of barbed-wire and creeping through.

He strides to the shed and steps into the cool interior. Butler's bike is parked in the corner beside a red and black tractor. Along one wall is a wide bench with tools scattered along its length and hanging from hooks on the wall above. A choice of three different hammers. Hay bales are stacked at the rear of the shed and along the opposite wall. The place smells of dry grass and petrol, a dangerous combination. Isaac could open the petrol tank on Butler's bike and tip it over.

One match.

Another accident.

The ceiling is crisscrossed with pigeon shit-stained wooden beams. A heavy chain and a hook hang from one beam. For fixing cars? Or lifting the carcass of a dead animal? Cobwebs flutter in the corners. Underneath the bench are shelves stacked with gumboots, folded tarps, plastic bottles and filters.

Isaac walks to the bench and picks up a wooden-handled mallet with a solid rubber head. It feels light in his hand. He pictures himself stepping into the yard and tossing it at the house, watching it somersault across the distance. The explosion of glass. Butler running onto the verandah. Isaac in the yard. Just the two of them.

Do they have guns on the property? They'd be locked in cabinets, the keys hidden in a safe. Does Butler know the combination?

The escalation of bitterness. From attending a party to an angry bullet.

Hanging from a hook above the bench is a khaki slouch hat with a feather, like the soldiers in World War I wore. Isaac remembers learning about boys from country towns like this walking hundreds of miles to the coast just to enlist. Strapping country lads able to ride horses and shoot with a steady hand and keen eye. Mr Thomas, his History teacher, said they believed they were going on a great adventure. During the final lesson before the exam, he presented each of the students with an eight-page photocopy of the letters soldiers sent home. Isaac read them until his eyes hurt. What was significant about every letter was what they didn't mention. No matter how much heartache and desperation the soldier tried to keep from his loved one, a sense of doom and futility crept onto each page, as if the pen betrayed the words. Boys not much older than Isaac and Butler. Boys destined to die as men before they had the chance to live.

When Isaac's father got home from work that afternoon, he sat on the back stairs to remove his boots and socks. Isaac brought him a beer, which he never did. His father accepted it with a grunt and Isaac sat down on a concrete tub where his mother used to grow herbs. The tub remained because his father couldn't burn or lift it. It was now full of weeds. Isaac asked his father about his grandad and what he did in the war.

His father took a long swig of beer and considered his answer. Isaac shuffled awkwardly on the tub while his father drained the beer.

'He drove trucks across the Territory in the Second World War,' his father said. 'Never fired a gun, never saw any action.' He spat into the yard. 'And

yet he paraded with his medals every year as if he'd won the war all by himself.'

Isaac guessed the medals were for service, awards every soldier received depending on how long he stayed in the army. His grandad had died the year before Isaac was born. On top of the wardrobe in his father's room was a slouch hat not so different to the one hanging in the shed. Isaac sometimes wore it when his father wasn't home. It smelt of mothballs and dust. He figured that because his father had kept it, the hat signified something worthwhile. Something to be honoured. Or treasured.

Isaac stares at the hat on the hook. A soldier's hat. It makes him ashamed to be here, slinking around the shed, looking at a route to revenge. A coward's ploy.

Butler throwing rocks.

Isaac threatening Butler. That's something his father would do.

Isaac places the mallet back on the bench and walks out of the shed. He looks up at the verandah wreathed in wisteria. Music pumps from behind the walls. He walks to the gate and scales it in an easy bound, following the path down to the archway over the road, shielded from the house by the willows.

Isaac walks back to town. He promises himself that each morning for the next week, he'll wait outside the cafe for customers. If Butler appears, Isaac will walk to meet him, apologise and try to make a truce.

But what if that doesn't work? Will he resort to punching Butler? To beating him into submission? A battle where the strongest wins.

Or should he leave town? To escape the violence and everyone it would hurt?

He thinks of Joan. And Sophie. He doesn't want to leave.

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CUBBYHOUSE

Sophie retreats to her cubbyhouse and climbs inside, sheltering from the intense sun. She stretches out her legs and closes her eyes, remembering being ten years old again. After that first night of falling asleep and being brought inside by her dad, she was determined to spend a whole night in her dream home.

On the following Saturday, she took her doona and pillows from her bedroom and stacked them inside the cubby, leaving enough space for a stuffed toy bear from when she was little. The bear's name was Essie and she'd spent the last few years marooned at the bottom of the bedroom cupboard. Sophie figured her parents wouldn't let her stay out all night alone, so Essie and their cocker spaniel, Max, were her only options. She placed Max's dog blanket next to her doona and spent the whole of dinner pleading with her mum and dad.

They relented, if she allowed them to check on her occasionally throughout the night. Sophie didn't mind. She had Max and Essie. One would growl and the other would sit wide-eyed and silent. She settled Essie in the corner, told her not to be afraid of cobwebs, and hauled Max up into the cubby. He whined and shuffled in circles on his blanket before lying down with his head on his paws. Sophie climbed in beside her partners and wrapped herself in the doona. Her mum and dad stood on the grass, looking anxious. It was then she produced her masterstroke. She took a whistle out from underneath the doona and blew on it loudly, explaining that if she was worried, or scared, or wanted help, she'd blow and blow until they arrived.

Sophie had no intention of blowing that whistle. It was entirely for her parents' benefit, so she'd be allowed to stay out all night in the cubby with

Max and Essie.

A bluff.

She was proud of herself for thinking of it. No point in worrying anyone when she knew she'd be safe inside, wrapped in a doona, admiring the stars and the swaying branches of Mr Gould's wattle trees.

Max snuffled in close. She reached out a hand and patted his stomach. They both fell asleep. Essie kept watch. Sophie slept through the night and woke to the sound of a lorikeet feeding in a wattle tree. She poked her head out of the window and admired the bird's bright red and blue feathers. It was still early and she pretended she was alone in the wilds of the jungle, among the animals.

Every Saturday night for that year, Sophie, Max and Essie slept in the cubby. Whenever her parents objected, Sophie brandished the whistle and reassured them with Max the guard dog and her cuddly bear. Sometimes in winter, or when it was raining, she let them win and she came inside late in the night. Sophie knew that to give a little ground meant she'd be able to return to the cubby the next Saturday. Sometimes to get your own way, you have to make people believe you were letting them win.

Sophie brushes a cobweb from the corner of the cubbyhouse and looks over the back fence to Mr Gould's trees in full bloom. She's no longer ten years old. Essie was given to a cousin who found her in the cupboard years ago. Max only lasted another year before dying in his sleep. When her dad suggested another dog, she shook her head. No-one could replace Max.

Sophie sucks in a deep breath and decides she must confront Butler. Another bluff, but she knows just what to say.

Mr Gould starts his lawnmower. Sophie waves and he removes his floppy hat and bows before beginning to mow. If only all men were like that, Sophie thinks. Like Mr Gould and her dad. And Isaac.

LINOCUT

The next day, Sophie is the first to arrive for Art. She walks around the room, looking at the drawings and paintings. She's surprised to see one drawing is of a naked woman, the contours of her body rolling and falling with the shadowed pencil lines. Sophie wonders who drew it. The school doesn't allow life-drawing classes. Sophie leans down to see if the artist left a signature.

Blank.

'It's brilliant, isn't it?' Ms Reynolds says from behind her.

Sophie steps away from the drawing. 'Absolutely,' she says. 'But it's unsigned.'

Ms Reynolds dumps her handbag on the desk. Sophie notices she's wearing Frida stockings again.

'The artist is too modest,' Ms Reynolds says. 'Another one destined for art college.'

Sophie walks to her desk. 'I'm hoping to go to art college at the end of next year, Ms,' Sophie says. 'Would you be able to write a letter of introduction?'

Ms Reynolds nods. 'I'm so pleased to hear that.'

Sophie stares at the drawing. Maybe she won't be alone in Melbourne.

The rest of the class file into the room. Trudie waves at Sophie. Sophie waves back and wonders if she's the mysterious nude drawer? That would be perfect. Trudie and Sophie in the city, both in their rooms obsessing over their artwork. Sophie could live with someone as funny and straightforward as Trudie.

While everyone starts on their own project without Ms Reynolds having

to say a word, Sophie hesitates. She can't get the naked figure out of her head. It's so simple, yet powerful.

Her cubby and owl linocut is finished, already hanging on her wall at home. The river linocuts are printed and gift-wrapped for Isaac and her parents. She thinks Christmas for Mum and Dad, and maybe sooner for Isaac? To take his mind off the broken window. Last night they texted each other and Isaac admitted he was scared of Butler returning. Sophie wanted to tell him she had the answer, but knew he'd try to talk her out of it. No chance.

Sophie stares at the blank lino in front of her. She takes her pencil and begins copying from the life drawing on the wall. She can't match the fluid lines of the artist, but is happy to begin something new and different. Her naked woman is chunkier, less evenly proportioned. She takes her time, rubbing out what doesn't look right, wondering how she'll cut these long sweeping lines. Sophie likes the idea of smudges and shadows, adding to the mystery of a human body.

She thinks of Isaac again, and his hands on her skin. How can ink and paper emanate warmth? Or the shiver of touch? She uses the pencil firmer on the naked figure.

She's so involved in this new project that she doesn't notice the minutes passing. The bell rings for the end of period and Sophie raises her head and blinks at the sunlight through the window. This project will keep her occupied for ages. She rolls up the lino and carries it from the classroom to her locker, blushing at the thought of showing this one to Isaac.

She fiddles with the lock and places the lino inside, pondering the thought of staring at her naked body in the bathroom mirror to learn about the contours and shadows of a female nude. It's much easier to imagine Patchett Bend, or a cubby and an owl, than to stare too long at something so personal.

PARKING

Gerry stands at the counter and looks out the window across the council car park. The sun reflects off the roofs of vehicles. He glances at the clock on the wall. One more customer before lunchtime, when he'll scoff a sandwich, change into lycra and spend fifty minutes pedalling the countryside. He looks at the computer screen and calls number sixty-eight.

A middle-aged man dressed in starched trousers and a crisply ironed shirt approaches the counter, slapping his ticket down in front of Gerry. The man wears black-rimmed glasses and has an extravagant shock of grey hair, lacquered down with pomade. He looks like a cross between an evangelical preacher and a bank manager.

'I've got a complaint,' he says.

Gerry smiles.

'Why are you smiling?' the man asks.

'It's my way of saying I'm here to help, sir,' Gerry assures him.

'Well that'll be a change,' the man says, his voice rising.

Gerry refrains from smiling again.

'These stupid plans for bicycle parking,' the man adds.

'Which stupid plans are they?' Gerry says.

'These ... these bunch of fools are planning to remove two parking spots from outside my jewellery store in Main Street and put in bicycle racks,' the man practically shouts the final two words.

Gerry knows the plans. He'd signed a petition organised by his Sunday cycling group asking council for these very racks.

'And the problem is?' Gerry keeps his voice low.

The man's face turns bright red. 'Two parking spaces gone. Two spaces

for my customers!’ he shouts. ‘Isn’t it enough that the department stores sell jewellery? Now I lose my parking spaces as well.’

Gerry leans forward. ‘Do you know, sir, studies have shown that more bicycle lanes and bicycle racks lead to better economic outcomes for a town.’

‘Bullshit!’

‘Yeah, I agree,’ Gerry replies. ‘What would a bunch of wanker academics know?’

The man opens his mouth as if to respond, then removes a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his forehead.

‘Here’s what I suggest,’ Gerry says. ‘Let’s put in a formal complaint that you’d like the planned racks moved.’

The man nods.

‘We’ll say you support the racks in principle,’ Gerry adds, ‘to placate the wankers in the planning department, but they just aren’t suitable outside your shop.’

‘Perfect!’ the man says. ‘Piss them off elsewhere.’

‘If I may be so bold,’ Gerry says, ‘why don’t we suggest the other end of Main Street near the cafes?’

‘Yeah, everyone knows cyclists only drink coffee and waddle around in those stupid outfits.’ The man grimaces.

‘We’ll make them someone else’s problem,’ Gerry says. He quickly types the details of the man’s complaint into the computer, making sure to word it carefully so as to not offend anyone. Without realising it, he’s whistling. A few people waiting in the office stare at him in surprise. Happiness is in scarce supply in the shire council. Gerry finishes typing and pushes the print button. The single-page document pops out of the printer under the counter.

‘If you’d like to read this, and sign and date it, sir,’ Gerry says, ‘I’ll do everything in my power to get the racks moved down the street. No promises, mind, but I’ll state your case forcefully.’

The man reads the document and signs it with a flourish.

‘You do understand that if the academics are correct, you’ll be missing out on increased custom?’ Gerry asks.

‘I’ll take that chance.’ The man winks at Gerry as if they’re sharing a secret, then offers his hand. They shake.

Gerry watches him walk out the door and across the car park. He gets into a blue HiLux that would barely fit in one of the parking spaces they’ve just discussed. Space enough for ten bicycles.

Gerry takes the complaint form to the planning department. Dave, the town planner on duty, reads the complaint.

He looks at Gerry and shrugs. ‘I don’t care where the racks go,’ he says.

‘Maybe outside Joan’s Cafe?’ Gerry suggests. ‘From memory, the road is quieter there.’

Dave nods and lodges the complaint into his computer.

Gerry plans to tell all his cycling buddies to write to council in support of the racks outside Joan’s. And to tell them about the jeweller who doesn’t like cyclists.

PAYBACK

Sophie walks along the verandah at lunchtime. Alone. All morning she's been working herself up to this moment.

In the seniors room, she sees Butler sitting on a beanbag, watching Lachlan and Brandon play hacky sack. Every time Lachlan drops the sack, Brandon cheers. Butler takes out his phone and films his mates.

'I'll post it on YouTube,' he yells, 'under Loser.com.'

Brandon laughs. Lachlan focuses on the game, a drop of sweat flicking from his brow as he returns the sack. The boys are so involved in the game, they don't notice Sophie as she enters. When the sack drops near her feet, Butler stops filming.

'Sophie, wanna play?' Brandon calls.

She steps over the sack and sits on the beanbag next to Butler's. Butler puts the phone into his jacket pocket. Where was Max the guard dog when you needed him?

'What do you want?' Butler sneers. Sophie remembers the last time they spoke was when she told him to piss off.

'I'm ... I'm sorry about the other night at your party, Butler,' Sophie says, hoping her voice doesn't betray her true intentions.

Brandon and Lachlan stand in the middle of the room, the hacky sack forgotten.

'Come on, guys,' Butler says. 'Give a man some space.'

Brandon picks up the sack and shepherds Lachlan out the door. They hang around on the verandah, alternating between juggling the sack and waiting to be readmitted. Whenever a group of students walk past, the boys muscle their way closer to the window as if wanting to be near the action.

‘You should have stayed,’ Butler says, flicking the hair out of his eyes.

‘I realise now I made a mistake,’ Sophie replies.

‘And yet you called me a loser the other day,’ Butler says.

‘I ... I thought you were making fun of me.’ Sophie can’t think of any other excuse.

‘I was joking,’ Butler says.

Sophie’s heard that before. She takes a deep breath and smiles. Forgive me, Isaac, for what I’m about to say, she thinks.

‘The guy I brought to the party was the loser.’ She tries to keep her voice level, wondering if Butler can see her leg shaking on the beanbag.

‘I guessed as much,’ Butler says.

‘At the end of the night, I gave him a wrong number so he wouldn’t bother me again.’ Sophie hopes Butler is as gullible as she imagines.

Butler grins.

‘But he did get away with stealing your beer, didn’t he?’

‘Nah.’ Butler wriggles deeper into his beanbag. ‘I sorted him ... eventually.’ He smirks, looking at his mates on the verandah.

‘What did you do?’ Sophie asks. One more minute, she thinks to herself. Just one more minute.

‘Lachlan and I paid him a visit,’ Butler says.

‘Do you know where he lives?’

‘We taught him a lesson at that dive opposite Grind, where he works,’ Butler says, leaning back in the beanbag and stretching his legs.

‘Did you punch him?’ Sophie asks.

Butler hesitates.

‘You could take him,’ Sophie adds, ‘easily.’

‘I smashed the front window,’ Butler says. ‘He’ll get fired, I reckon. If not, I’ll go back next week and break it again.’

‘Wow,’ Sophie says. ‘That’s so cool.’ Mission accomplished. She stands. Butler was so determined to save face, he’d given himself up without her having to try.

Butler reaches for her hand to help him up from the beanbag.

She steps away, the blood rising to her cheeks. 'You must be really proud of yourself, throwing rocks and all.' She looks down at him.

'What?' he says. 'The dickhead deserved it.'

'Why?' Sophie steps further out of his reach, even though she wants to kick him.

'What's got into you?' Butler asks.

'What did he ever do to you?' Sophie hovers between anger and frustration. The boys on the verandah stop playing, both leaning forward against the window.

'He wasn't invited ...' Butler says.

'I invited him, you jerk,' she says. 'Are you going to chuck rocks at my house as well?'

Butler struggles up from the beanbag. 'He stole my beer.'

Sophie almost laughs at how stupid he sounds. It's now or never.

'Do you remember before the last election,' Sophie keeps her voice low, 'your father began an anti-crime campaign.'

Butler's face clouds over. 'So?'

'So the council installed CCTV cameras along Main Street.'

Butler swallows hard.

Sophie removes the phone from her pocket and holds it up. 'And guess who's got footage of you chucking a rock?'

The colour drains from Butler's face. 'Bullshit!' His voice sounds pinched. 'No-one but council can get access.' He looks to his mates on the verandah.

'My dad works for council,' Sophie says. Not that he'd have access to the footage, but Butler doesn't know that.

'What the—' Butler says.

'Your dad would be embarrassed if the paper published footage of his son chucking a rock,' Sophie interrupts. 'So sit down on the beanbag and I'll tell you what's going to happen.' Sophie struggles to keep the nervousness

from her voice.

Butler looks towards the door.

‘Sit,’ Sophie hisses. She clenches her fists.

Butler does as he’s told.

Sophie steps a little closer. ‘I’ll keep the footage a secret,’ she says. ‘But if you go anywhere near Isaac, or me, or Sienna again, you know what will happen.’

She turns to walk towards the door, then stops. ‘If my dad suddenly loses his job,’ she adds, ‘the footage is released. So don’t think your father can save you.’ Sophie reaches for the door handle. ‘Deal?’ she says, before opening the door.

Butler shrugs his shoulders and nods. His hair flops in front of his eyes.

Sophie turns the phone so the screen faces Butler. ‘And for good measure, I’ve recorded this conversation.’

It takes a few seconds for Butler to understand. He scrambles up from the beanbag and races towards the door. Sophie walks through and closes it before he can reach her. They stare at each other. Despite her stomach churning, Sophie holds up her phone again. Butler swears through the glass.

The glass he hasn’t broken.

Sophie turns and walks down the verandah. Year Twelve students step out of her way. She’s somewhere between tears and fury, gripping the phone tightly in her hand and remembering it’s still recording. She stops at the top of the stairs and switches it off.

‘It’s over,’ she whispers to herself. ‘Done.’

SALVOS

Isaac walks into the Salvos on Main Street. An old lady in a peach-coloured frock stands behind the glass-fronted counter and looks up from sorting through a bundle of clothes. A pair of reading glasses sit on the bridge of her nose, and another pair hang from a cord around her neck.

‘Do you sell books?’ Isaac asks. Joan has given him fifty dollars to buy as many paperbacks as possible. He’s surprised she’s so generous, given the broken window and the impending insurance excess. Isaac’s decided to add twenty dollars of his own money, but not tell Joan. Lining the vacant shelves of the cafe with paperbacks is Isaac’s sure-fire solution to attracting more customers.

The lady behind the counter points down the aisle and pushes the glasses up her nose. ‘Right up the back, love,’ she says. ‘You’ll find books, magazines, even a few copies of the Bible, if you’re interested.’

Isaac nods and wanders past the racks of second-hand clothes, shelves of glassware and kitchen appliances, a cupboard filled with crockery and plates and a table covered with stacks of shoes and vinyl belts. Along the rear of the shop is a bookcase overflowing with hardcover fiction, paperbacks and magazines. Isaac spends the next thirty minutes sifting through the shelves. Most of the books are by authors he’s never heard of, but there are classics by Dickens, Steinbeck and two perfectly bound versions of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Isaac chooses the one that costs a dollar.

He stacks his choices on the table opposite, sorting them into piles based on themes. Detective novels in one stack, classics in another, adventure novels in a third collection and romance novels in the final heap. The stacks

get higher as he sifts through the shelves.

‘You planning on starting a library?’ a voice says behind him. The lady with the two pairs of glasses stands in the aisle. Isaac notices her hair is arranged in a severe bun, held in place by a tortoise-shell clip. She nods at the piles Isaac has created.

‘I ... I work at Joan’s Cafe,’ he says. ‘We want to give our customers something other than coffee.’

‘I know Joan,’ the lady says. ‘She’s a fine young girl.’

Isaac can’t wait to tell Joan she’s been described as a girl. That will improve her mood.

‘I’ve got seventy dollars to fill our shelves,’ Isaac says.

‘That’s a tidy amount,’ the lady replies. ‘Aren’t you worried the customers will spend all day reading, rather than drinking coffee?’

‘We’ve ... we’ve got plenty of space,’ Isaac reasons. ‘Better they sit and read than stare out the window.’

‘What’s your name, love?’ The lady pokes her glasses back up her nose.

‘Isaac.’

‘Well, Isaac,’ she says, ‘my name’s Margaret, and in the interests of educating our town, you can have ten extra books for free if you spend the entire seventy dollars. How does that sound?’

‘Really?’ Isaac can’t believe his luck.

‘I’ll make it down to Joan’s soon enough,’ Margaret continues, ‘to see how your experiment is going.’ She steps forward and touches the spine of the Mary Shelley. ‘Only you’ll be making me tea, not coffee, you understand.’ The glasses slip down her nose again.

Isaac nods and adds another book to the romance pile.

‘You need a few more classics, Isaac,’ Margaret says, her voice admonishing his choice. ‘Trust me.’

Isaac scans the shelves and chooses a Jane Austen. He tries to stop himself from smiling, knowing every selection he makes is being monitored by this lady.

‘Can ... can I ask you a question?’ Isaac says.

Margaret nods.

‘Why do you have two pairs of glasses?’

Margaret seems to straighten and for a moment Isaac is worried he’s offended her.

‘Why do you think?’ she asks.

‘Long- and short-sighted?’ Isaac ventures.

‘Precisely,’ Margaret says. ‘And I can’t be blowed looking for them in my handbag, or on the counter. So they both stay where they’re needed.’

Isaac begins a fifth stack focused on children’s books. He hopes it will encourage parents to bring their kids after school. Margaret makes a sound at the back of her throat, which Isaac interprets as displeasure. He looks up from the fresh stack.

‘And now I have a question for you.’ Margaret seems to be smiling. Or smirking. Isaac can’t tell which. Isaac guesses Margaret is a retired teacher. He imagines English? Or History?

‘How do you propose to carry these books back to the cafe?’ Margaret says, unable to keep the amusement from her eyes.

Isaac looks at the stacks and understands. He hadn’t thought of that.

‘I ... I can make a few trips,’ he suggests.

‘Quite a few,’ Margaret adds, ‘judging by these piles.’

Isaac scratches his head and waits. He has the impression Margaret will come up with a solution. Anyone smart enough to carry two pairs of glasses will not be defeated.

‘May I suggest an old lady’s shopping trolley?’ Margaret says.

‘How ... how much is that?’ Isaac says.

‘Don’t be silly, Isaac,’ Margaret says. ‘I will loan you mine. On the understanding you’ll return it as soon as practicable.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ Margaret says. ‘It will give me pleasure seeing a young man with a shopping trolley trundling down Main Street.’

‘You’re ... you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’ Isaac says.

‘Absolutely,’ Margaret replies, before walking back down the aisle and returning a few minutes later with a peach-coloured shopping trolley.

‘It matches your dress,’ Isaac says.

‘Don’t be cheeky, Isaac,’ Margaret says, helping him stack the trolley full of books.

‘Don’t you have to check the prices?’ Isaac asks.

‘Seventy dollars.’ Margaret winks at him. ‘As we agreed earlier.’

Isaac smiles.

‘Keep filling the trolley, love,’ Margaret says.

Ten minutes later, Isaac attracts a few inquisitive looks from pedestrians as he trundles down Main Street with Margaret’s trolley. He’s sure she stayed on the footpath watching him until he was out of sight.

In the cafe, he stacks the books in the storeroom out the back and tells Joan of Margaret calling her a girl. Joan seems taken aback at just how many books Isaac has bought. He assures her it will be good value in the long run.

She looks to the broken window and forces a smile. Isaac realises nothing will help until the window is fixed.

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CAKE

In the afternoon, Sophie waits on the corner of Main and Lovell streets. A woman in sports pants and a bright-orange tank top leads three shaggy-haired dogs on leashes. The dogs sniff along the edges of the footpath.

Sophie texted Sienna asking to meet here.

The woman waits at the traffic lights, the dogs straining forward. A man hangs out the passenger window of a car turning left and makes a barking sound at the dogs. They cock their ears and look confused. The woman ignores him.

‘Hey, partner,’ Sienna says, tapping Sophie on the shoulder.

Sophie smiles, the knot untwisting in her stomach. ‘I’ve got something I want to show you.’

‘Shall we go to Grind?’ Sienna suggests.

‘I know somewhere better.’ Sophie grabs Sienna’s hand and leads her down the street. It’s nice to have a friend to go to Joan’s Cafe with again.

Sienna stops outside a camera store and releases Sophie’s hand. ‘I can’t wait any longer,’ she says. ‘Is this about Butler?’

‘I did something to stop him,’ Sophie admits.

‘Then I’m buying you cake!’ Sienna says. She takes a few steps down the street, before turning. ‘If you tell me everything.’

Sophie rushes to keep up with Sienna. The footpath is crowded with school kids and shoppers, the afternoon air damp with perfume and petrol fumes. A bead of sweat trickles down Sophie’s back as she stands beside Sienna outside Joan’s Cafe, both of them staring at the damaged window.

‘Butler spoils everything he touches,’ Sienna says.

Sophie sees Isaac behind the counter when they enter. He offers an

uncertain wave. They sit at a table under the Juicy Fruit advertisement. Sophie places her phone on the table. She can feel her knees shaking. Isaac walks to the table, the order pad in his hands. Sienna scans the menu, an impish grin on her face.

‘We haven’t had many customers today,’ Isaac says, glancing from Sophie to the window.

Sienna holds out her hand. They shake.

‘I’m Sienna,’ she says. ‘Your ... your friend’s friend.’

Isaac looks confused.

‘I’m sorry, Isaac,’ Sophie says. ‘I told Sienna about ...’

Isaac bites his lip.

‘But I’ve fixed it,’ Sophie adds.

‘Just like that?’ Isaac says.

‘It doesn’t take a genius to get the better of Butler,’ Sophie says.

‘Maybe we could get some cake and coffee,’ Sienna interrupts, looking at Isaac, ‘before Sophie tells us her ... secret?’

‘Can I have a flat white please?’ Sophie asks.

‘Me too,’ says Sienna. ‘And a piece of carrot cake to share.’

Sophie watches Isaac making the coffee and cutting a slice of cake for them. As he puts the slice on a plate, she notices his hand is shaking. He carries the tray to the table. Sophie smiles at him but it comes out all wrong.

When he places the plates on the table, Sophie reaches across and pushes the vacant chair out. ‘Can you sit down, please?’ she says.

He hesitates.

‘Please?’ Sophie pleads. ‘Just for –’ she swipes her phone and peers at the screen ‘– three minutes and twenty-five seconds.’

Isaac sits down.

‘Sienna, who watches too many crime shows on television, gave me an idea,’ Sophie says, ‘about how to deal with Butler. That’s why I’ve invited her here to hear this too.’

Isaac looks towards the damaged window again.

‘I’ve had a few issues with Butler as well,’ Sienna adds.

Sophie leans across and touches her phone screen. A scratchy version of Butler’s voice vibrates across the table. They listen. Sophie notices Isaac flinch when Butler threatens her. As soon as the recording finishes, Sophie switches off the phone as if removing Butler from the cafe and from her life.

The only sounds are the rumble of traffic and the hum of the fridge. Sophie looks out the fractured window. A boy skateboards along the footpath and two ladies sit on the bench seat talking, one waving her hand extravagantly.

‘I’ll send you the file, Isaac,’ she says eventually. ‘You can let Joan know.’ She cuts a sliver of cake to give her hands something to do, but there’s no way she can eat.

‘Are there CCTV cameras outside?’ Isaac asks.

‘I checked yesterday,’ Sophie says. ‘One on the street pole near Grind and another opposite the jewellery shop.’

‘Do you really have the footage?’ Isaac’s voice is quiet, as he glances to the kitchen.

Sophie shakes her head.

‘Oh you gorgeous wonderful bullshitting beast of a girl,’ Sienna says, leaning across the table and squeezing Sophie’s hand. ‘That is—’

‘Genius,’ Isaac interrupts.

Sophie sits up a little straighter in the chair, lifts the fork to her mouth and takes a satisfying bite of cake. It’s sweet and chewy. She savours the taste.

‘Butler beaten by an illusion,’ Sienna says, still smiling at Sophie.

‘I have a confession,’ Sophie replies. She remembers seeing Sienna in Grind a few days ago. The thoughts that went through her mind. ‘I always thought you were a little ... fake,’ she says. ‘I’m really sorry.’

‘Maybe I was,’ Sienna says, reaching with her fork for a chunk of cake. ‘Or maybe we spend too long being a mirror to what others expect.’

‘Not anymore,’ Sophie says.

After Sienna leaves the cafe, Sophie returns to the table against the wall. Joan emerges from the kitchen. Sophie orders another coffee, worried Joan is thinking she's just hanging out to be near Isaac. Which is the truth.

When Joan brings the coffee to the table, Sophie says, 'I love your apron.' Joan's wearing a black apron with the face of Johnny Rotten, the lead singer of one of her dad's favourite bands, the Sex Pistols, superimposed over the Union Jack. Johnny is snarling, showing all of his bad teeth to the camera. Sophie remembers watching the 'Anarchy in the UK' video with her parents, surprised at the anger in the music.

Joan laughs. 'I only wear it when I'm cleaning out back,' she says. 'I don't want to scare the customers.'

'My dad likes punk,' Sophie says.

'I don't know anything about it,' Joan says. 'I support a republic, so anything anti-royalty is fine by me.' Joan looks to the window.

Isaac returns to the table, carrying his backpack. 'I'll open early tomorrow,' he says to Joan.

'Okay,' Joan says. Sophie can tell she's distracted by the damage.

'It won't happen again,' Sophie says.

Joan looks confused. 'How can you be so sure?' she says.

Sophie glances at Isaac. He nods.

'Because we convinced Butler to keep away from now on.'

'That's what I love about young people.' Joan wipes her hands across Johnny Rotten's dental problems. 'You're so wonderfully optimistic.'

Sophie holds up her phone. 'We've got evidence,' she says.

Joan raises an eyebrow in question.

'Sophie recorded a conversation where Butler admits he threw the rock,' Isaac says.

'You're kidding,' Joan says.

'If Butler comes anywhere near ...' Sophie lets the sentence hang.

'One less thing to worry about,' Joan says. 'Now we just need more customers.'

Sophie stands. She can tell Joan is still distracted and will be until the window is properly fixed. 'Maybe you could design a new sign for the window?' she suggests.

Joan looks out to the street.

'To attract customers ...' Sophie's voice dwindles to silence.

'Or maybe a replica of Johnny Rotten's face on the window,' Joan says. 'Stuff free enterprise!' Joan smiles at Sophie, and clicks her fingers. 'Actually, you've given me an idea.'

'Really?' Sophie asks.

'I'll make a few calls and we'll see,' Joan says. Her mood appears brighter. 'You two go and have fun and let me get down to business.'

They walk to the door, and Sophie turns to see Joan is already on the phone.

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PARK

Sophie and Isaac walk down the Main Street footpath crammed with shoppers, school students and workers finishing early. Sophie scans the faces of people passing, recognising kids from school, friends of her parents, the shop workers and owners of her home town. She reaches for Isaac's hand and their fingers entwine.

'Where are we going?' he asks.

'I thought you were leading!' They stop walking and look at each other, grinning.

'My place?' Sophie suggests.

Isaac looks nervous.

'Okay, how about Olsen Park?'

Isaac nods and they duck down an alley, cross the street and enter the park through the war memorial gates, which welcome them along a path of gravel bordered by flowering shrubs and stately gum trees. A few joggers rush past, sweat stained and breathing heavily. Two young mothers push prams, eyes on their babies. In one corner of the park, a group of senior citizens practise tai chi, led by a woman in a black leotard and pink top. Sophie is reminded of herons on the beach at St Kilda, tall and pale, moving in slow motion. She spent hours watching them as a child on every holiday with her parents. St Kilda: the smell of suntan lotion and the promise of ice cream, watching the birds, the ferry to Tasmania and her parents under the umbrella on the sand as she played in the shallows.

Isaac leads her to a bench seat under a poplar tree. They sit close.

'Like oldies in a park,' Sophie says, holding up their entwined fingers.

'Nah,' Isaac says, nodding towards the tai chi group. 'They're too busy

exercising.'

'I'd like you to meet my parents,' Sophie says. 'They're nicer than you imagine.'

Isaac nods. 'It's ages since I've been in someone's house,' he admits.

'Maybe you can come over soon,' Sophie says. 'Just you and me alone together.'

A round of applause rings across the park. The senior citizens gather up their jackets and crowd near the woman in the pink top, talking and laughing. They leave the park as a group.

'It was a gutsy thing you did,' Isaac says, looking up at the leaves rustling above their heads, 'to confront Butler.'

'I'm sorry I ever asked you to his party,' Sophie says. 'But I wanted to see you again.' Sophie is amazed to be admitting this to Isaac, so calmly, so naturally. She looks up at the swaying trees too.

'He'll run you down to his mates, and the others. Or he'll try and embarrass you in class.' Isaac's voice is quiet.

'Something petty,' Sophie adds.

'To make up for what he thinks he's lost,' Isaac says.

The silence stutters between them.

'How did you get so ...' Sophie can't think of the word.

'I know bullies,' Isaac says.

Opposite the park, two boys ride scooters along the footpath, their schoolbags loose on their shoulders. One boy lets his right hand drift through the lavender hedge of a front garden.

'You don't talk much about your town,' Sophie says.

The boys on scooters slow for the tai chi group, before passing them on the lane. Sophie waits, hoping the silence will encourage Isaac to answer.

'I once saw a news report of a bank robbery,' Isaac says. 'The security camera showed the robber entering, holding a gun and running towards the first counter where a man was being served.' Isaac takes a deep breath. 'The robber pointed the gun at the female clerk and tossed her a small bag that

she started filling with cash. But the thing that struck me was the man on the robber's side of the counter, so close to the gunman, turned his back and looked away, as if nothing was happening.'

'Did you expect him to fight?' Sophie says. She's not sure what this has to do with where Isaac lived.

'No. No, not at all. I expected him to keep an eye on the gun, the danger,' Isaac says. 'But he ignored the robber, dismissing the gun, the tension, the threat, like ... like he was casually waiting for a bus.'

'If he couldn't see it, it wasn't happening?'

'Exactly. It wasn't part of his world, even when it was right in his face.' Isaac sits back and stares across the park, the sunlight filtering through the trees, a man walking his dog on a lead, and the hum of distant traffic from Main Street.

'He was trying to ignore the trauma?' Sophie suggests.

'That's it!' Isaac turns in the seat. 'That cliché about everyone looking at the car accident, no matter how bad it is. No matter how much it'll scar us,' Isaac says. 'This man was ... future-proofing himself.'

The man in the park unleashes his dog and tosses a ball. The dog bounds after it, skidding into a row of bushes where the ball disappeared.

'And that's what you were doing in your old town?' Sophie asks.

Isaac looks down at his shoes. 'I wanted to be like that man,' he says. 'Able to hide from what's right in my face, but sometimes,' Isaac swallows, 'sometimes it got too close.'

Sophie feels Isaac's hand tighten around hers.

'Psychologists say it's better to talk stuff through,' Sophie says.

The dog drops the ball at the owner's feet and springs away, ready for another chase.

'One step at a time,' Isaac says.

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PLAN

In the early evening, Sophie makes a plan: one part inspiration and three parts Google. She starts by googling *British punks touring Australia*. She discovers a hardcore punk Facebook page and an online fanzine dedicated to all things anarchy, and after refining her search terms she finds exactly what she's looking for: a list of British punk bands planning to tour Australia. Given some of these bands are very old, it's a longer list than she expected.

Who or what are *Sham 69*?

And *The Undertones*?

She alternates between the computer screen and her dad's array of CDs alphabetically arranged on the bookshelf. After a few trips back and forth, she finds a match.

Billy Bragg.

She pops the disc into the sound system and presses play. A single discordant guitar and a working-class English accent boom from the speakers. She sits back and listens, and falls in love. Billy has a way of mixing the silly with the serious. Humour and politics, love and morality. So simple.

Sophie types Billy's name into Google and discovers he's a similar age to Pete Shelley, but still very much alive. He has a scruffy beard and one of his albums is called *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*. She reads everything she can find and laughs at how perfect Billy is. And the most perfect thing of all? He's touring Australia at this very moment and playing three concerts in Melbourne. Tickets are still available for Saturday night.

Sophie searches Airbnb accommodation in the inner city where her

parents used to live. She needs all the blocks to fall into place to convince them to leave her home alone. Or home with Isaac to be precise.

She forgives Billy when he sings about a girl cutting her hair. When she hears a car in the driveway, she turns the music up even louder.

‘It’s just you and me, Billy,’ Sophie whispers to the sound system as her mum slides open the door to the kitchen and carries a bag of groceries inside. Sophie jumps up to help.

‘Oh, I love Billy,’ Dana says. They ferry shopping bags from the car to the kitchen, Sophie stepping carefully over a lizard on the back step.

Her dad arrives home a few minutes later. He parks his bicycle under the awning and half-dances inside when he hears Billy.

‘My favourite one-man band!’ Gerry says.

‘He’s even better than the Buzzcocks,’ Sophie says.

‘You have such good taste!’ Gerry smiles.

‘And I know something about Billy you both don’t know,’ Sophie says.

Her dad’s face turns ashen. ‘Oh please, not Billy too.’

‘He’s fine, Dad,’ Sophie says. ‘In fact, he’s in Australia right now.’

Her parents exchange glances. Dana busies herself packing the groceries in the fridge.

‘Come on, you two,’ Sophie pleads. ‘You know you want to.’

‘We can’t afford it.’ Dana closes the fridge door.

‘Rubbish!’ Sophie almost shouts.

‘Would you like to go?’ Gerry looks at Dana.

‘I love Billy,’ she says. ‘Almost as much as I love you.’

‘And I’ve found some cheap Airbnb places in Clifton Hill,’ Sophie adds.

Her mum stops unpacking the groceries. Her dad leans against the kitchen table and crosses his arms. A kookaburra laughs in embarrassment from the power pole outside. Billy falls silent as a song ends.

‘What?’ Sophie says.

‘Do you have plans while we’re at Billy’s concert?’ Dana asks.

‘No,’ Sophie lies, knowing she’s overreached.

‘Great.’ Gerry claps his hands. ‘I’ll buy three tickets.’

‘Seeing as you’re such a fan,’ Dana adds.

‘Oh come on, you two,’ Sophie says. ‘Can’t I stay at home just once?’

‘Alone?’ Dana asks.

‘Alone-ish,’ Sophie says.

‘I think it’s time we heard about this boyfriend of yours,’ Dana says, walking around to stand beside her husband.

‘Really?’ Sophie says. ‘You’re not going to Billy Bragg because I might invite Isaac around?’

Gerry’s face goes pale again. He looks to the front door as if an unexpected guest has arrived. ‘What did you say?’ His voice is strained.

Sophie and Dana stare at him.

‘Are you okay, Dad?’ Sophie asks.

‘What’s ... what’s his name?’ Gerry stammers.

‘Isaac,’ Sophie repeats. ‘Why?’

‘Does he work at Joan’s Cafe?’ Gerry asks.

Sophie blushes. No-one says a word.

Billy interrupts with a line about beer and tattoos.

‘But ... but he’s my friend,’ says Gerry.

Sophie’s mum looks at Gerry with a mixture of surprise and bewilderment.

‘He’s *my* boyfriend,’ Sophie emphasises.

‘He’s *my* barista,’ Gerry counters.

‘I have no idea who he is,’ Dana says. ‘And I wish you two would stop talking in riddles.’

Gerry rubs his eyes, walks around to the sink and pours himself a glass of water. ‘Isaac works at Joan’s Cafe in Main Street,’ he says. ‘He offered to teach me how to use the coffee machine.’ He looks at his wife. ‘You know I’ve always wanted to operate one of those things.’

‘All the more reason to leave me here with someone you know,’ Sophie says, ‘while you go and see Billy.’

Billy responds by serenading the kitchen with love and fervour.

‘What’s this Isaac like?’ Dana asks.

‘Great,’ Sophie says.

‘I was asking your dad,’ Dana adds.

‘About *my* boyfriend,’ Sophie repeats.

‘He makes a great coffee,’ Gerry says.

‘Really?’ Sophie says. ‘That’s the best you can offer?’ She’s not sure whether to be amused or insulted.

‘He’s a good kid,’ Gerry adds. ‘Shaggy hair, kind of awkward, I guess, someone I’d—’

‘Leave with my daughter while I went to see Billy Bragg in Melbourne,’ Sophie finishes the sentence.

‘Not exactly what I was going to say,’ Gerry replies. ‘But, it’s possible.’

Sophie runs to her dad and wraps her arms around him. She kisses him on both cheeks and then hugs her mum as well.

‘Hang on,’ Dana says, holding Sophie at arm’s length. ‘Just because your dad reckons this ... this boy makes a good coffee, isn’t enough reason,’ Dana adds.

‘Mum! Forget the coffee. I like him. Dad likes him. His boss, Joan, likes him and she’s your age.’ Sophie realises that didn’t come out quite right.

Dana holds up her hands. ‘Well, it’s decided. Because Isaac’s boss *and* your dad recommend him, I’m supplying the condoms.’

‘No need, dear,’ Gerry says. ‘There’s some in the top drawer of the bathroom cupboard.’

Sophie’s mum glares at Gerry. If looks could kill.

‘They were left over from a council health initiative,’ Gerry explains. ‘I knew Sophie would need them one day.’

‘I’m sure Isaac will bring his own,’ Sophie adds, before realising her mum doesn’t get the joke. ‘Not that we’ll use them,’ she adds.

Dana packs away the last of the groceries. Gerry drinks his water and refills the glass. He sculls it in one gulp. Sophie stands in the middle of the

kitchen, waiting.

‘So, I’ll book the tickets?’ Gerry asks.

Dana stands at the cupboard. She looks from the shelves stacked with food to her husband, before nodding. Sophie jumps with glee.

‘I’ll show you the Airbnb places, Dad,’ she says, reaching for her dad’s hand and leading him to the computer.

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WISTERIA

After dinner, Gerry and Dana take up their usual spots in the garden. A fingernail moon hovers between the gutter and the grevillea. Gerry was very careful to drink only one beer during dinner. Conversation at the meal included a long list of Billy Bragg quotes sparring with Dana's attempts to find out more about Isaac. Billy won. He had better one-liners.

Dana pours her second glass of wine and reaches for her husband's hand. 'Tell me it's alright,' she says.

'It's better than alright,' he says. 'We need a weekend away and Sophie will be fine.'

'With Isaac?'

'Sophie will be fine alone. And probably even better with Isaac. We know our daughter,' he adds.

'But I don't know Isaac,' she counters. 'Maybe I should sneak in for a coffee tomorrow, unannounced.'

Gerry hears a freight train rattle in the distance. A nightjar chirps. The sky contracts into darkness.

'He seems like a good kid.' Gerry remembers their conversation about parents. 'Although I suspect he's had a difficult home life.'

Dana frowns.

'Just from something he said,' Gerry adds. 'But look, Joan is a wonder. If she's willing to trust him alone in the cafe on Sunday—'

'Are you suggesting our Sophie and a shop are the same thing?'

'No, of course not,' Gerry says. 'You know what I mean.' Gerry stands, walking to where the wisteria vine stretches over the garden arch and touches a hanging flower. 'This shouldn't be about Isaac anyway. It's

Sophie I trust. Has she ever given us cause to ... to doubt her?’

Dana shakes her head. Gerry walks back to his chair.

‘I don’t want to become a hypocrite in my old age, Dana,’ Gerry says, reaching for her hand again. ‘I had sex when I was sixteen. Not good sex, mind. Being a teenager was an adventure and the opposite sex were part of the deal.’ He looks at his wife. ‘We both drank too much, smoked too much dope and slept with people we shouldn’t have. And please don’t tell me we were more mature than Sophie. Because I know I wasn’t.’

‘Me neither,’ adds Dana.

‘We joke about condoms all the time,’ Gerry says, his voice hushed. ‘But Sophie’s not stupid. And from what I know of Isaac, neither is he.’

‘Maybe I’m just getting old,’ Dana says. She looks up at infinite darkness. A cicada starts thrumming somewhere in the garden.

Gerry squeezes his wife’s hand. ‘We’ll have Billy, and each other, to take our minds off things.’

‘What Billy has to say,’ Dana says, ‘never grows old.’

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BANNER

Isaac stands on the footpath outside Joan's Cafe. He admires the new front window. Ever since the glazier fixed it ahead of schedule, Joan's mood has changed. For most of today, she sat at a table looking through the window, a smile as broad as Main Street on her face, scribbling notes in a small pad. When Isaac asked if he could help, she shook her head and said she was drawing up a list of customers. Isaac didn't understand. As if you can choose your own customers.

He walks back inside, strolls behind the counter and continues working on a concoction he's been experimenting with. When he's finished, he carries it to Joan where she's sitting at the rear of the cafe.

'My version of an iced coffee,' Isaac says, offering her the glass.

Joan takes one sip and agrees to add it to the menu. She scribbles in her notepad some more.

He sits opposite Joan and stares until she stops scribbling.

'What?' she asks.

Isaac nods at the pad in her hands.

'I'm listing the customers I'd like,' she says.

'Don't we want *all* customers?'

'Not ones who throw stones,' Joan says. 'Not that bunch across the road who double-park while waiting for their coffee and to hell with everyone else!' Joan stands, indignant. 'Bugger it,' she says. 'I've been here longer than anyone. It's about time I got to choose who I invite into my cafe.'

Isaac looks around the vacant room. Not many people seem to be taking up Joan's offer.

'I've accepted your friend Sophie's challenge. I'm going to design a new

window display,' Joan adds.

Joan sits down again and pushes the notepad across the table. She flips through the pages of handwritten lists until she comes to one with a semicircular design of *Joan's Cafe* arched across a banner. The banner reads:

We welcome students, truckies, the homeless, the unemployed, farmers who believe in climate change, grey-haired women, bald old blokes, women with tattoos, men without tattoos, locals and travellers, cyclists and mothers. If you're smiling, we may offer a discount. This cafe is a barista-free zone but if you don't enjoy your coffee, it's on us.

'Butler did me a favour,' Joan says. She points to the notepad. 'That'll be up on the front window from Tuesday afternoon, paid for by the insurance.'

'What if everyone demands a discount?' Isaac says.

Joan holds up her hands in mock surrender. 'Shame on you, Isaac.' She smiles. 'If there's one thing you've taught me, it's to have a bit of faith in human nature.'

Isaac swallows hard. 'All I've caused you is trouble,' he says.

'Rubbish,' Joan says. 'I'm now open all day Sunday, with hordes of cyclists for customers. A few of those blokes have come back during the week. This place is their regular cafe now, because of you.'

'Really?' Isaac thought of the cyclists filling the shop. Gerry unable to resist coming behind the counter to help him with the cake and coffee. They made a good team.

'This new sign,' Joan says. 'It's not an advertisement. It's a statement of intent.'

Isaac stands to return to the counter. Joan reaches out and grabs his wrist.

'You know,' she says, 'I wasn't so sure about you, when we first met.' She lets go of his wrist and he sits back down. 'You tried to con me into giving you a cheap coffee,' Joan says. 'As if someone my age could be so easily fooled.'

Isaac blushes. 'You gave me raisin toast as well,' he says.

‘I decided to trust my instincts,’ Joan says. ‘That’s what this new sign is, son.’

Isaac likes being called son. The bell above the door chimes and two truck drivers enter. Joan nods and Isaac walks behind the counter to serve them.

‘Any chance of a couple of lattes, mate?’ the truckie with the scruffy beard says.

Isaac wonders if he should offer them a discount if they promise to sound their horns every time they see a red-haired schoolboy.

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JACARANDA

On Saturday afternoon, Sophie parks the car outside Fudge hair salon. She's picking up Isaac in twenty minutes, but first wants to repay a debt.

She dropped her parents at the train station early this morning with promises to pick them up tomorrow evening. Her dad played Billy Bragg all the way to the station, while her mum asked Sophie for the hundredth time if she had phone numbers for their neighbours. Sophie listed the Jensens from next door, the Lucianos from across the road, Mr Gould from over the back fence, and offered to stop at the sports store to buy a gun if her mum thought she needed extra protection. She steered the car into the station drop-off zone and got out to hug them both. Her dad lugged an overnight bag while her mother carried her doubts and worries. Sophie kissed them and hopped back in the car when they'd disappeared into the station waiting room.

She let Billy accompany her home where she'd tidied her bedroom, removed all the clothes from the floor and – embarrassment of embarrassment – had actually checked that there were condoms in the bathroom cupboard. She half-expected her mum to have gone in after dinner and confiscated them.

There they waited.

Ansell Lifestyle Zero. Sophie blushed and laughed at the same time. Could wearing condoms be regarded as living a lifestyle? And zero? Was that describing the wearer? The type of lifestyle? Or the number of little sperms that could breach the plastic barrier? Sophie counted the condoms.

Fifteen.

What was her dad thinking? How would she explain the pile of condoms

to Isaac? If it should arise? She blushed again. Of course it was going to come up. She wanted it to happen.

Or did she? Maybe she wanted it to happen. But so soon? She couldn't be sure. Maybe she should stop thinking about it. Why spoil a weekend alone in the house? Alone with Isaac.

Sophie walks into the salon, nervously touching her hair. Julia is sitting at her desk, reading another glossy magazine.

'How's Angelina's political career going?' Sophie asks.

Julia looks up and beams. 'About as promising as my hairdressing business,' she says.

Sophie reaches into her pocket and offers Julia a fifty-dollar bill. 'I owe you,' she says.

'The deal was only if you liked the haircut,' Julia says.

'I walked out of here,' Sophie says, 'and invited a boy to the party.'

Julia claps her hands. 'Good for you,' she says. 'And?'

'I'm seeing him again in a few minutes,' Sophie adds.

Julia reaches for her phone. 'Can I take a photo?' she says. 'Your hair has grown back just how I'd hoped. Maybe you'll start a trend at school.'

Julia snaps a few photos as Sophie does her best not to look embarrassed. Julia holds the screen up for Sophie to see the results.

'I've never been comfortable looking at myself,' she says.

'Who is?' Julia says. 'Except maybe Angelina.'

'I just wanted to thank you,' Sophie says. 'What you said after the haircut meant something.'

Julia bows. 'Let's call it the revenge of the perm, shall we?' she says.

'My parents have gone away for the weekend,' Sophie says, not understanding why she's telling Julia.

'Honey, my eldest son has been trying that trick on me and the husband for the past year.' Julia grins. 'He reckons he can be trusted.'

'Maybe he can?' Sophie says.

'If I had a daughter, I'd consider it. But three boys left alone in the house

...’

‘My dad has this mantra he always quotes back to himself,’ Sophie says. “‘I remember being young.’”

‘All the more reason ...’ Julia adds. ‘So, where are you going with your boyfriend, if I may ask?’

Sophie whispers, ‘A secret swimming spot.’

‘Patchett Bend?’

‘How did you know?’ Sophie says. ‘No-one goes there.’

‘It’s where I lost my ... perm.’ Julia winks. ‘My first boyfriend’s family owned the house at the end of the road.’

‘The wreck that burnt down last summer?’

‘Yep. Crashed and incinerated, like our romance,’ Julia says. ‘I keep encouraging my husband to have a picnic out there. It’s a beautiful spot.’

‘Jacaranda heaven,’ Sophie says. She doesn’t know why, but she leans close and hugs Julia.

‘The best thing about your haircut,’ Julia says, ‘is that you can go swimming. Not like my perm.’

They both laugh.

Sophie offers a small wave from the door and walks back to the car. Before she gets in, she looks into the salon. Julia is standing at the front window, smiling.

Main Street is tinged with a golden light from the setting sun. Sophie checks her watch and pulls up outside Joan’s. Isaac grabs his backpack from the pavement and hops into the front seat.

‘I’ve been waiting all day for a swim,’ he says.

Sophie lightly touches his arm, before checking her rear-view mirror and driving away.

‘Patchett Bend?’ she says.

Isaac nods.

‘I see Joan’s window is fixed,’ Sophie says.

‘They finished it this morning,’ Isaac says. ‘We gave the workers free

cake and coffee to celebrate.'

As they drive out of town, Sophie looks at the traffic passing in the opposite direction and at a young boy playing in the front yard of a house.

She glances across at Isaac. 'Are you okay?'

'I was ... I was thinking of my father,' Isaac says.

Sophie grips the wheel a little tighter.

'Butler smashed a window,' he says. 'I grabbed a hammer and smashed my father's television.'

Sophie indicates and turns onto a dirt road. She slows and steers carefully over the corrugations.

'I planned it all,' Isaac continues. 'I'd saved as much money as I could and hid my backpack in the bushes.' He shifts uncomfortably in the seat. 'It wasn't the television I planned to smash ...' his voice dwindles away.

Sophie winds down the window as if the pressure in the car is too much to bear.

'I wanted to ... to hurt him,' Isaac says. 'What I did wasn't much different to Butler.'

Sophie pulls the car off the road onto a flat patch of grass and switches off the engine.

She reaches for his hand. 'No.' She grips it tightly and stares across the fields. A few cows wander in a line back to the milking shed of a property on a distant hill. 'Was your father violent?' Sophie asks.

'Only when he was awake.' Isaac's voice is strained.

'He was the aggressor,' she says. 'You ...' her voice falters.

'It was him or me,' Isaac says. 'Or the television.'

Sophie wraps her arms around Isaac. 'You chose well,' she whispers.

They stay like that for a few minutes. The only sound Sophie hears is her own breathing. She pulls away and kisses him on both cheeks, kisses the pain from his eyes.

'Every day is a step further from him,' Isaac says. 'A step further away from remembering ...'

Sophie nods and starts the car again, returning to the dusty road. After a few kilometres of slow juddering, she turns onto a gravel track that leads through a field of dandelions and flannel flowers. She stops the car in the shade of a jacaranda tree.

‘I’ve never brought anyone here,’ she says.

She looks across a patch of sand to a wide bend in the river. On the far bank, a rocky outcrop covers the higher ground. The water flows slow, purple blooms floating on the surface. She leans over to the back seat and grabs the towels.

‘Will you get the esky?’ she asks Isaac.

He nods, jumps out of the car and opens the boot. Sophie runs to the riverbank and builds two pillows of sand beside each other before laying the towels across them. Isaac places the esky near a towel and sits down, removing his shoes and shirt. He struggles out of his jeans to reveal brand-new black-and-orange board shorts.

Sophie pulls her t-shirt off and sits down before removing her shorts. She’s wearing a black-and-white one-piece swimsuit she’s owned for years, only ever worn at Patchett Bend.

A flock of galahs land in the gum tree on the far bank. Their screeching cuts through the dry air. Sophie stands and says to Isaac, ‘Come with me.’

They walk across the fine sand to the water’s edge and stand in the shallows.

‘Quick or slow?’ she asks.

‘One step at a time.’ Isaac moves into the stream. ‘Until we’re out of our depth.’

Sophie follows. The river bottom is sandy and she can still see her feet even though the water swirls around her chest.

‘When I invited you to Butler’s party,’ Sophie says, ‘I thought Joan was your mum.’

‘You kept asking if she’d let me come,’ Isaac remembers.

‘You must have thought I was strange,’ she says. ‘Where ... where is your

mum?’ Sophie asks.

‘She left,’ Isaac says. ‘You either meet violence with the fist. Or you retreat. She chose to escape.’

Sophie takes a step towards Isaac and reaches for his hand. Isaac squeezes her hand and leans back until he’s floating, looking up at the fading sky. Sophie does the same.

‘Sometimes I drift for ages,’ Sophie says. ‘The flow is so gentle here in the depths.’

They drift, weightless, staring at the expanse of sky.

‘I have to tell you something.’ Sophie lets go of Isaac’s hand and stands on tiptoe. ‘You won’t believe it.’

‘Please don’t let it be bad news,’ Isaac says.

Sophie smiles.

‘What?’ Isaac adds.

‘Sorry, I want to prolong the moment, because ... it’s so weird,’ she says.

Isaac waits.

‘Do you know a man called Gerry?’ Sophie asks.

‘The guy in lycra?’ Isaac asks.

The colour rises in Sophie’s cheeks. ‘He’s my dad.’

‘You’re kidding,’ Isaac says. ‘He’s a great guy!’

‘I know,’ Sophie says. ‘And guess what?’

Isaac raises an eyebrow in question.

‘He’s in Melbourne with Mum for the weekend,’ she says.

‘He’s a really great guy.’

Sophie swims into his arms. Jacaranda blooms float downstream. On the far bank, a herd of dairy cows stand at the fence watching. A cormorant flies overhead and lands on a branch extending over the water.

Sophie kisses Isaac and he kisses back.

GANG

At lunch on Monday, Sophie sits at her favourite spot outside the library with her eyes closed, thinking of Isaac's body. Hollywood movies get it so wrong. On screen, everything is soft-focus and dimly lit, bodies entwined like snakes, smooth and shiny as if the display has been crafted by a sculptor. There is no warmth and no smell. She remembers Saturday night in her own bed with Isaac. Whoever wrote the script for Sophie's Hollywood romance did it in gibberish. Elbows and knees, parts of her body she took for granted, came back to haunt her – limbs were everywhere and always getting in the way. Bodies aren't smooth and glossy. They're pointy and clumsy and angular and firm and hairy and have little bumps and undulations, and each person has their own smell. Isaac smelt of coffee and river water.

It took most of the night for Isaac and Sophie to learn how to fit all the moving parts together. She found herself wriggling closer into his arms in the darkness, touch her only way of navigating. It was soft and warm. And awkward, painful, exciting and embarrassing.

Sophie feels herself blushing at the thought.

In the morning, after sleeping together all night entwined, they woke at precisely the same time. Isaac kissed Sophie on the cheek and pulled the doona up close. And then—

'Why are you smiling?' a voice says.

Sophie opens her eyes, the heat rising in her cheeks.

Sienna grins. 'You were totally not here.'

Sophie nods, unable to speak for a few moments. She moves along the seat to give Sienna space. A tribe of boys play basketball on the court,

huddles of girls hang out in the canteen line and students walk past in groups, while a teacher prowls the playground in search of litterers. And all along Sophie was in bed with Isaac. She blushes again.

‘I’m forming my own gang,’ Sienna says. ‘The S Gang. Want to join?’

‘Because my name begins with S?’

‘Exactly. And because you sit outside the library here all alone, smiling as if you’ve just won a prize.’

‘Who else will you invite?’ Sophie asks. ‘Ms Sims?’

‘Why not?’ Sienna laughs. ‘Actually, she can be our patron.’

‘And maybe Ms Reynolds as well?’ Sophie suggests.

Sienna stares across the schoolyard. Sophie follows her gaze. Butler and Lachlan are walking along, tossing a hacky sack over the heads of some younger girls who try to squeeze past.

‘Has Butler tried anything?’ Sophie asks. In a Hollywood movie, he’d slink away, friendless and defeated, not continue to saunter through the schoolyard as if it was his own personal fiefdom.

‘Nah,’ Sienna says. ‘But Isabella and Jessica are rather unfriendly to me at the moment.’

‘That sucks!’ Sophie says. Butler had avoided Sophie’s gaze in every class they share. She knew he didn’t have the guts to return to Joan’s. No matter how much he paraded around the schoolyard, he wasn’t worth worrying about.

‘It’s okay,’ Sienna says. ‘They think I’m just being a bitch. They don’t know the whole story.’

‘Shouldn’t you tell them?’

Sienna shrugs.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sophie says. ‘Friends should stick together. No matter what.’

‘That’s why I chose you.’ Sienna leans across and pokes Sophie gently in the stomach. ‘So, what rules should apply to our gang?’

‘Is it a rule to have an S in your name?’ Sophie asks.

‘What about Trudie Goddard?’ Sienna interrupts.

Sophie thinks of Trudie approaching her in the library earlier, holding her dad's book. Sophie felt her whole body tense.

'I read it twice,' Trudie said. 'I reckon some poems were as good as ... as song lyrics.'

'Can I tell my dad you said that?' Sophie said.

'Sure,' Trudie said. 'For what it's worth.'

Trudie turned and walked away before Sophie could tell her just how much it was worth.

Later, they find Trudie sitting alone on a bench seat overlooking the oval. Sienna walks up and sits beside her. Sophie stands until both girls move along to give her space. Trudie wriggles uncomfortably to the edge of the seat.

'Trudie,' Sienna begins, 'on a score of one to ten, how would you rate Butler?'

Trudie looks across the oval at the football game in progress. Sophie notices not one shirt is tucked in among the players. Everyone's socks are around their ankles. The game is littered with cheers and cursing.

'How ... how do you mean?' Trudie asks. She takes off her glasses and wipes them on her blouse.

'As a person,' Sienna says. 'Imagine you were stranded on a four-hour bus trip. Could you sit beside Butler for that long?'

'I'd rather be alone.'

'Now?' Sienna says. 'Or on the bus trip?'

Trudie shrugs.

'Sorry, Trudie,' Sophie says. 'It sounds like a trick question, but trust me, it isn't.'

'In ... in that case,' Trudie says, 'can I give Butler a minus score?'

Sienna laughs and wraps her arm around Trudie's shoulder.

'Trudie,' she says, 'how would you like to go for coffee this afternoon?'

'Maybe.'

'If we're lucky, Sophie will tell us what she was smiling about earlier,'

Sienna says.

‘Not a chance,’ Sophie says.

A boy scores a goal and wheels away from the crowd, his arms raised in celebration. Two of his teammates approach and bow at his feet.

‘Do you know that boys have two million less brain cells than girls?’ Sienna says, looking down at the oval.

‘Really?’ Sophie asks.

‘Nah,’ Sienna adds. ‘I just made it up.’

‘Actually,’ Trudie says, ‘studies have shown lots of differences between the brains of men and women.’

‘See,’ Sienna says, putting her other arm around Sophie and drawing both girls close to her.

Sophie decides she likes her new gang. She wonders if Sienna will allow Isaac honorary membership. The sun comes out from behind a cloud and shines on their faces. Trudie adjusts her glasses again. Sienna hums a tune. Sophie closes her eyes, but this time tries not to think of naked bodies.

BILLBOARD

Gerry estimates the billboard measures six metres across and three metres high. It towers over him beside the main road out of town. He crouches in a ditch, armed with a can of black spray paint and a ladder. It's a few minutes after midnight on Tuesday morning. An occasional truck thunders past, but most of the time Gerry is alone in the darkness with his thoughts.

The billboard is predominantly red with a yellow logo in the centre. Underneath the logo are the words *Love the taste*. Gerry understands there's no need to list the brand of fast food anywhere on the advertisement as the logo says it all.

An hour ago, he crept out of bed, having warned Dana of his plans before they fell asleep. She kissed his cheek and told him to be careful.

He padded to the bathroom and removed the can of spray paint from its hiding place. As he walked out, he noticed Sophie's bedroom light was on. He opened her door and stuck his head into the room. She was at her desk, working on a linocut. She heard him, turned and smiled.

'I ... I couldn't sleep,' she whispered.

Gerry walked to her desk and kissed her on the forehead. Her linocut was of a naked female form.

'It's my latest,' she said. 'Inspired by a drawing in Art class.'

'It's great,' he answered. He realised his daughter was growing up fast, one linocut at a time.

Sophie nodded at the spray can in his hands. 'I'm not the only one thinking of art in the middle of the night.' She laughed.

'There's a billboard outside of town that's pissing me off,' he said.

'That's ... that's a little ambitious,' Sophie replied.

‘The bigger the better,’ Gerry whispered. ‘All the more people will see my handiwork, I hope.’

‘Be careful, Dad.’ Sophie looked towards her window, as if danger lurked somewhere outside.

‘I’ll take a photo to show you in the morning,’ Gerry said, before tiptoeing from her room and leaving the house, checking the door was locked as he went.

A breeze blows across the fields and cools the sweat on his brow. Gerry reaches for the ladder and carries it towards the billboard. Clouds drift across the sky, shading the moon. The night smells of dry grass and eucalyptus. He sets the ladder under the logo, listening for approaching traffic. An owl hoots in the darkness.

Gerry climbs one rung at a time, until he’s balanced two metres above the ground. The ladder holds steady. Uncapping the spray can, he sets about writing a black scrawl against the red canvas, preparing to spell out the words *to an early death* under the *Love the taste* slogan. He sprays slowly and methodically, careful to set each letter at a similar height and thickness to the slogan, for maximum effect. As he works, he wonders how long his protest will be up here before the advertising company notices. He hopes for a week. Or two? Enough to plant his message in the mind of every passing motorist.

‘You spelt *early* wrong,’ a voice pierces the darkness.

Gerry grips the ladder in surprise and spins around, almost losing his footing.

A man stands on the side of the road, wearing jeans, a chequered shirt and black boots. He holds a wide-brimmed hat. Gerry feels his fingers tense around the spray can.

‘No,’ the man adds. ‘My mistake. That’s correct.’ He slaps his hat against his hip, as if beating the dirt from the brim.

‘I ... I didn’t hear your car,’ Gerry says. He feels vulnerable stuck up a ladder.

‘That’s because I walked down from my house.’ The man gestures across the paddock.

‘How did you know I was here?’ Gerry listens for approaching traffic and wonders if he should climb down.

‘I was sitting on my verandah admiring the quiet when I saw your car pull up and its lights go out.’ The man looks up at the billboard. ‘They didn’t come back on so I figured maybe someone needed help.’

Gerry turns back to the billboard. He takes another step down from the ladder.

‘What does *d e a* mean?’ the farmer asks.

‘I was halfway through *death* when you interrupted me,’ Gerry admits.

The farmer puts on his hat and steps towards the ladder.

‘I’ve never eaten there myself,’ he says. ‘My grandkids seem to like it though.’ The man grips the ladder. ‘But I reckon you should finish what you started.’

Gerry nods and climbs the ladder. He takes longer than necessary spraying the last two letters, making sure they’re just the right height. When he’s finished, he slips his hand into his pocket and takes out a phone. He swipes the screen and hands it down to the farmer.

‘For my wife and daughter,’ Gerry says.

‘Or the cops when they eventually catch you.’ The man laughs.

In the distance, a truck rumbles along the highway. The man steps back and holds up the phone. Gerry checks he’s not obscuring the newly painted slogan and smiles, holding the spray can aloft.

The flash blinds him for a second as a semitrailer thunders past. Gerry watches its tail-lights recede into the night.

‘I reckon we both should be heading home,’ the man says.

Gerry climbs down from the ladder and takes the phone offered to him. He holds out his hand and the men shake. Gerry looks at the wrinkled face of the farmer. He looks vaguely familiar. Maybe he’s served him at the council office? Or they’ve passed each other on Main Street?

‘Thanks,’ Gerry says.

The farmer removes his hat and slaps it against his hip again. Gerry wonders how one hat can hold so much dust.

‘Good job, mate,’ the farmer says, looking from the billboard to his house on the hill. He coughs once and begins walking across the paddock.

‘Hey,’ Gerry calls. ‘I don’t suppose you’d want to join me one night?’

The farmer twirls his hat in his hands. A cow bellows from a distant paddock.

‘You know where I live,’ the farmer nods, before walking away.

Gerry likes the idea of having a companion to edit the world. He folds the ladder and carries it down the highway to where his car is parked. He loads it in the hatchback and looks up to the farmer’s house. A single light illuminates the verandah.

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BOOKS

This morning Isaac arrived at the cafe earlier than usual. He's spent the last hour stacking books along the ledges around the room. Joan loved his idea of enticing customers to spend time reading and relaxing so much that she brought boxes of books from home to add to those from the Salvos. Isaac returned to the second-hand shop yesterday and bought a newspaper rack from Margaret with his own money and filled it with magazines.

Once he's taken the empty boxes out to the back alley for recycling, Isaac fires up the coffee machine, unlocks the front door and walks outside to the footpath, looking up and down Main Street.

For the past few days, he's still half-expected Butler to wander into view, maybe armed with a hammer, a fist-sized rock or a posse of his schoolmates. But he's beginning to believe that Sophie has shown, once and for all, that brains beats brawn.

As Isaac stands outside the cafe, he realises that he's looking forward to the day. He has nothing planned, other than working at Joan's and meeting Sophie after school. Maybe they'll hang out in the cafe before swimming at Patchett Bend and then go back to her place.

He loved her house the moment he stepped through the front door. The smell of herbs in the kitchen, the shelves dedicated to books and music, the shiny floorboards, the way you could stand in the kitchen and talk to someone in the lounge, the vast space with the light filtering through the windows. It felt like a home. It was as breezy, sunny and optimistic as Sophie and Gerry. And maybe Sophie's mum, who he was meeting later this week over dinner.

On Saturday night, Isaac wandered through Sophie's house, out to the

garden where she explained her parents sat every night. She showed him her cubbyhouse and they climbed inside and sat admiring Mr Gould's garden.

When they went back inside, he opened cupboards, smelt the fresh towels in the bathroom, marvelled at the amount of food in the fridge, leafed through book after book before stopping at Gerry's thin volume of poetry. Sophie blushed.

A truck rumbles down Main Street and Isaac wants to emulate that young boy he met on his first day in town. The boy encouraging every truckie to let rip with the horn. He should have known from that moment that this was a place to stay. He stares down at his boots, still dusty and worn, the soles uneven and chipped at the edges. He's travelled just far enough from where he was born to be safe. To be free.

He's arranged with Joan to stay in the room above the cafe. It has dusty floorboards, white-painted walls and a bathroom at the rear. Best of all, the front windows let in the morning light and allow a view down Main Street. Joan refused to take his offer of rent money, arguing he was now full-time security for the cafe. They both laughed, no longer expecting a return visit from Butler.

Last night, he and Sophie spent hours sweeping and mopping the floor, wiping the cobwebs from the walls and opening the front windows to let in the breeze. Sophie's linocut of Patchett Bend was given pride of place, hung from a screw in the wall above the old fireplace. She'd smiled when he unwrapped it. He held it in his hands and couldn't speak for a long time.

He'd purchased a sleeping bag and a mattress topper, which softened the floorboards. Sophie had brought pillows from her bedroom, laughing at how many still remained scattered across her doona. They stood at the front window for ages, discussing whether he should buy curtains. They decided against it, preferring the view down Main Street.

After Sophie left, with kisses and hugs in the laneway where she had parked, Isaac returned to his flat and snuggled into the sleeping bag, staring

out at the stars.

This morning he woke to sunlight and decided that he hadn't been homeless in this town at all. To be homeless was how he'd lived the past few years with his father. A place where he felt unsafe and unwanted. Where danger and uncertainty lurked. To be homeless was to be unloved and alone. His father was homeless.

Isaac is settled, as much a part of this town as the truckie rolling past. He catches sight of his reflection in the window, above Joan's new sign. He moves closer, noticing for the first time since he was a child that his eyes sparkle. They are not the eyes he's seen reflecting back these past years, a mirror of defeat and fear and tension. The eyes he sees in Joan's window are not cloaked, or red-rimmed, or vacant.

Isaac looks up and down Main Street, wipes his hands on his jeans and wanders into Joan's Cafe, ready for a day of working and talking with people he knows. Or people he will soon know. To be among friends. To be with Joan. And Sophie. And her family. To be loved.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How to Repaint a Life has an origin spanning more than twenty years. That's how long I've been visiting schools to talk to students about my verse novel *The Simple Gift*. I'm always surprised and excited to see how involved the students are in the story of Billy, Caitlin and Old Bill. They ask endless questions, many of which I answer inadequately. There's so much 'left out' of that story, and for many years those omissions have gnawed at me. Every question I can't answer in a classroom adds to this feeling.

It isn't that I believe *The Simple Gift* is somehow lacking. But it tells a limited story that skips over certain issues raised by homelessness, family violence, being a parent, friendship and loneliness.

No book can perfectly answer every question, or address every issue.

But the more the students responded positively to *The Simple Gift*, the more I was drawn to consider writing another story based on similar themes, only this time addressing some of those omissions of the verse novel.

How to Repaint a Life stands alone as a novel, but its genesis comes from over a hundred classroom questions. And for that I'd like to acknowledge everyone who's welcomed me and *The Simple Gift* into their school, who's cheerily bombarded me with questions, insights, responses and suggestions that have guided me back to my study to write *How to Repaint a Life*. It's been a long and pleasurable experience.

I'm forever grateful that *The Simple Gift* is still read in so many classrooms throughout the country. I hope *How to Repaint a Life* works as an independent sister-book to my verse novel.

And because I'm acknowledging a book from my backlog here, it's only natural I pay due respects to the people who've supported and guided me over these past few decades.

I'd like to acknowledge Leonie Tyle and UQP, who twenty-five years ago had the courage to release the first verse novel for young adults ever published in Australia. They followed this a few years later with the first verse novel for children ever published. Both were happily written by me.

After Leonie, Kristina Schulz at UQP enthusiastically and creatively championed the verse-novel format by some brilliant writers, as well as continuing to shape my ramblings into acceptable books. I thank her for such dedicated support and guidance.

I'm fortunate that in almost thirty years at UQP, I've had Leonie, Kristina, and now Clair Hume as my publishers. Clair's sensitive attention to detail and creative insight into the lives of Isaac, Sophie and Gerry have shaped *How to Repaint a Life* more skilfully than I could have ever achieved alone.

I'd also like to acknowledge the superb editing of Felicity Dunning for *Repaint*, and Kristy Bushnell, my editor for the previous five books. Every time I finished an editorial journey with Kristy, I'd be eager to return to my study to begin the next book – such was her encouragement and skill in inspiring me to think I had something worthwhile to say.

Finally, I'd like to thank my beautiful wife, life partner and cycling buddy, Cathie Gorman, for all her love and support, and our two adult sons, Jack and Joe, whose loving presence always reminds me of why I chose to be an author for young people in the first place.

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First published 2021 by University of Queensland Press
PO Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

uqp.com.au
reception@uqp.com.au

University of Queensland Press (UQP) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQP operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

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Cover design by Jo Hunt
Author photograph by Cathie Gorman
Typeset in Bembo Std 11/15 pt by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane



University of Queensland Press is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.



University of Queensland Press is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 978 0 7022 6315 6 (pbk)
ISBN 978 0 7022 6483 2 (epdf)
ISBN 978 0 7022 6484 9 (epub)
ISBN 978 0 7022 6485 6 (kindle)

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